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Nevaeh

Book: 29

Kellie’s Stories

Part: 1

Young Future

Kellie- ‘I’m- a like a dart devil- I just keep sucking it.’

It was said that my mom had shattered finger bones; that hands, but where clumsily, for a mishap she had or something. Ray- I have a six-pack it is under my bear belly. Kellie- Nice!

Once Hanna told me- that she likes me because I am for real- Because I feel things. But that is the whole problem: how much I feel things.

‘Hello?’ I call out as soon as I am inside Kellie’s apartment- home. The front hall is dark and cool as always. Goosebumps prick up over my arms.

No matter how… many times, I come to Kellie's house I am always shocked by the power of the air-conditioning, which hums somewhere-deep inside the walls. For a moment, I-just stand there, inhaling the clean smells of furniture polish and Windex and fresh-cut flowers. Music is pulsing from- Hanna’s room upstairs. I try to

identify the song but cannot make out any words, just bass throbbing through the floorboards.

Hey, girls want to do something nice for your boy, take the shampoo, get a glob, and rub your boy’s thing down with your hand and then it is clean if you think it is not showering it and shut up. Same the other way around there… Another typical Wednesday night. Ray a bit puzzled replied, ‘Well you didn’t say anything, besides, I thought you enjoyed it as much as I did.’ I put her

hand on his face, and told him she took it for love, she took it for him. I kissed her hand, told her thanks, and asked her how long it took before sex stopped being painful?

I am smiling said- ‘we screwed for two months straight before taking a day off, so I’ll say I was broken in by then.’

Today, I was thinking of a girl asking men out. How does it feel to fall in love with your best friend and then face the fear of asking them out?

I fell in love with him, way before I even knew what had happened to me. Sometimes love sneaks up on a person like that, I guess. I had known him all my life and we had always been friends.

He had a sweet tooth like no one I had ever met. In so many ways, he was my exact opposite. He was tall, too handsome for his good. Some might even go as far as to say beautiful. I, on the other hand, was of average height with dirty blonde hair. I loved making ice cream and seeing the joy it brought

to people’s faces although I rarely ate it myself.

We were always close, so I was not sure how it happened. One day, he walked into my ice cream shop just like he had many others yet, this time was different. Suddenly, I found myself caring about what I looked like when he was around. Making sure that I had his favorite ice cream in stock, adding extra whipped cream to whatever he ordered.

Nevertheless, he never seemed to act differently about me. He gave me

the same beautiful smile that he always did. The same silly jokes that made me laugh.

He knew that I hated my laugh. I always ended up snorting. He did not care; he thought my snorting was hilarious.

That was our friendship though, it was as if the only change of emotion was coming from me. Last week he brought a date in- which was the worst. Knowing that while I loved him, he was there with someone else who was painful.

I did my absolute best not to show it, and I was successful. They left hand in hand. Luckily, being the best friend gives me insight into his relationships. Turns out, that she was not his type. The problem was that she refused to sleep on her side of the bed. Such a silly thing to break up with someone over. Though, I do understand a little. I am quite attached to my side of the bed. Who am I kidding? It is ridiculous, if you loved them, it would be a problem that would work itself out.

His breakup though is good news for me though. Today is going to be the day. Today, I am going to ask him out. I cannot stand to wait for him to see me that way any longer. Today, I will charge forward and make my destiny and all that other silly crap we tell ourselves to help us be brave.

#- Hashtag: (power- girls)

Criss- Do you remember the time Karly peed her dress in class and got up and rain out of the room, to me it was cute, she was remembered for it.

Kellie- ‘Ray?’ I say as he walks in and sits at the table in the corner.

Awaiting as he always does for his daily scoop. ‘Can we talk?’ I ask, my hands shaking as I hid them behind my back.

‘Sure, whatever you need. Are you having some sort of trouble? Is it a guy?’ he asked with a wink. I thought about punching him then I thought about telling him to forget about it.

‘Actually, yes Ray its guy trouble.’ I told him. ‘I’m really into a guy, that I have been friends with for

quite some time. How do I get him to see me as more than just a close friend?' He will just figure it out I thought to myself.

He did, and I could see the shock on his face. 'You mean me?'

'Yes, it is you.' I put my eyes down to the floor. I examined the tile and every intricate detail as we both sat there in silence.

'I would love to go out with you.' He finally said with a voice that melted my heart like chocolate. I looked up and into his eyes.

He was not appeasing me, he looked pleased. As if, I had just given him a present. ‘I will take you out, and I will never let you go.

I thought this day would never come; I have waited for your love for a long time.’ I could not believe what I was hearing, is it possible that I was the one that did not see him. Suddenly, I could see the world open before me. Him at my side for all the world to see forever.

As they were preparing to take a shower, I asked him to get on the bed

and hold his legs back as far as he could. He only got them halfway. Annie laughed and told He the next time her legs are back to her head, he will have a new appreciation for her flexibility.

In the shower when Kellie was bathing

Ray and- and the other way around, just as she started to wash his dick, she and he play with it- like if he remembered a couple of weeks ago when she was a little tipsy from the wine and sucked him off? He went mm, I remember it well baby, you backed

me to the wall, and you kept going, you were great.

‘And how long did you say your nuts were hurting from that blowjob’ she asked with sarcasm? About four days, why do you ask?

Annie stood up with his dick still in her hand and asked her if he wanted another one, a little better? He thought about the strong orgasm he had, he also thought about his nuts hurting for days. Now honey, the same old slow and deep one is simply fine.

Annie kissed him and said, ‘I thought so.’

This post is a follow up to ‘Her… Parents in the house, no sex for you’

Finally, Ray thought as he watched his parents plane taxi down the runway for takeoff, he can have some fun with his wife. Kellie could tell she was ready to release two days of backed-up semen and put a plan into motion to slow his role. On the walk to the parking lot, she asked him to let her drive home.

She looked a little puzzled and said ‘Sure, that’s fine, but why today, you always let me drive.’ Annie smiled and started laughing saying ‘I don’t want you to get a speeding ticket or into an accident rushing home to plow me.’

He just looked at her before replying that he was not going to ‘Plow’ her as soon as they got home. Kellie said oh really, in that case, can we go to the mall? With a serious look on his face, he said- ‘Sure honey as soon as

we check-in and out of that airport hotel.'

Her shaking her head as to say I cannot believe you. 'Hey- you just said you didn't want to plow me, now you want to check into that hotel' I said while pointing at the hotel. He only said, 'I'm not going to jump you as soon as we get home, I'm going to play with my favorite parts of you first.'

As soon as he said it, he knew he had made a mistake. I stopped walking towards the car and repeated Ray saying- 'favorite parts!' he only

said- ‘Yeah, my favorite parts.’ She said, ‘ok Mister, by the time we get home before you get any of my parts, I want to know your top two favorite parts, ok.’

~*~

On the drive home, he cannot think straight, backed up semen have that effect on men. His thoughts were to take I parts piece by piece and log them from one to whatever. Of course, she was first, but is it his number one? Where does her breast fall on his

favorite list? What about her big as he is always playing with!

Oh, freak'n shit, what have I gotten into he thought. He was so deep in his thoughts when he finally looked at Annie, he could swear she was silently laughing at him.

When they got home, she asked he 'are you ready to tell me your favorite two parts of my body, and don't get cute by saying one is my brain, only what you can see and feel honey.' As I started to talk, he told him to hold that

thought, she will be right back, and went upstairs.

I went to the kitchen to get a beer and rethink his statement about wanting to play with his favorite parts of her body.

I did not hear her come downstairs- but when he looked up, I was standing at the bottom of the stairs butt naked. With his mouth open and not a word coming out, this happens often, I said- ‘Come show me your top two parts- honey.’ As he walked towards me- he thought about telling

her he could not choose. Then it came to him in a flash. Teddy grabbed a hand full of Annie's hair and bent her head back saying this is number one, with his other hand he grabbed a hand full of her plentiful hip and said this is number two. He kissed her deeply, so deeply that

Annie pushed him away and said, 'I'm ready to be plowed.'

At the top of the stairs, I pause. Hanna's bedroom door is closed. I do not recognize the song she is playing- or blasting, really, so loud I must

remind myself that Hanna’s house is shielded on four sides by trees and lawn, and no one will sic the regulators on her.

It is not like- any music I have ever heard. It is a shrieky, shrill, fierce kind of music: I cannot even tell whether the singer is male or female. Little fingers of electricity creep up my spine, a feeling I used to have when I was a tiny child when I would creep into the kitchen; and try to sneak an extra cookie from the pantry- the feeling right before the creak, and

squeak of my mom’s footsteps in the kitchen behind me, when I would whirl around, my hands and face coated in crumbs, guilty.

I shake off the feeling and push open Hanna’s door. She is sitting at her computer, feet propped up on her desk, bobbing her head and tapping out a rhythm on her thighs. As soon as she sees me, she swings forward and hits a key on her keyboard. The music cuts off instantly. Strangely, the silence that follows seems just as loud.

She flips her hair over one shoulder and scoots away from the desk.

Something flickers over her face, an expression that passes too quickly for me to identify it. ‘Hi,’ she chirrups, a little too cheerfully.

‘Didn’t hear you come in.’ ‘I doubt you would have heard me break-in.’ I go over to her bed and collapse on top of it. Hana has a queen-size bed, with three down pillows. It is like heaven.

‘What was that?’

‘What was what?’

She lifts her knees to her chest and swivels a full circle in her chair. I sit upon my elbows and watch her. Hanna only acts this dumb when she is hiding something.

‘The music.’ She still stares at me blankly. ‘The song you were blasting when I came in. The one that almost burst my eardrums.’

‘Oh- that.’ Hanna blows her bangs out of her face. This is another one of her tells. Whenever she is

bluffing in poker she will not stop fussing with her bangs.

‘Just some new band I found online.’ ‘On LAMM?’ I press.

Hana’s music-obsessed, and used to spend hours surfing LAM, the Library of Authorized Music and Movies, when we were in middle school.

Hana looks away. ‘Not exactly.’

‘What do you mean, ‘not exactly’?’

The intranet, like everything else in the United States, is controlled and monitored for our protection. All the websites, all the content, is written by government agencies, including the List of Authorized Entertainment, which gets updated biannually. Digital books go into the LAB, the Library of Approved Books, movies, and music go into LAM, and for a small fee, you can download them to your computer. If you have one, that is. I do not.

Hanna sighs, keeping her eyes averted.

Finally, she looks at me.

‘Can you keep a secret?’

Sometimes when you oversleep, it comes back and bites you where it hurts. She and he were up late last night playing around until four am, not having sex but playing the kissing game and fingering. Their kissing game is different than the one you may be thinking of.

It all started when he asked Annie when she bought the dress she had on today. I told him has a memory problem, it was him that picked the

dress out of a display window on their vacation trip to Ohio. This started the ‘I have a better memory than you.’ Every time one could not remember something, the other gets ten kisses anywhere they wanted to.

All night long they were kissing thighs, tits, dicks, pussies, and even butt cheeks. It went on so long, they both fell asleep without having sex. Although he believes he had three orgasms since she is being right so much, or the fact he lost so much and

got to kiss extraordinarily little of Annie’s stuff.

I gave Ray one the fastest baths ever like us. They both laughed when- she said, ‘I don’t need to wash your dick; you haven’t used it.’ Ray said, ‘I’m going use it tonight like never before.’ Ray pointing to various parts of Annie’s body said, ‘I want a little bit of this, a little of that and I’m coming back and getting a little more this.’ Annie said: ‘Sure, promises, promises.’ A quick kiss and they were off to work.

Ray had been in a meeting all day and had a message to call his wife when he got out, not an emergency just calls at his convenience.

When Ray called Annie, he found out his parents flew into town on a business trip, and she invited them to stay at their house for a couple of days. Ray was surprised to hear that because his dad was adamant he would not stay in the mother- in- law suite until they had a grandchild.

The first night after dinner and everyone retired for the evening, I was

looking forward to a lot of action from her. It did not take long for Ray to find out his plans were not Kellie's plan. The pace was set in the shower, I gave Teddy a regular penis wash, and this is not what he is grown accustomed to.

He asked, ‘what kind of a dick wash was that?’ she said- ‘your parents are in the house, and you may not know it, but you’re loud when you come.’ Raymon said- ‘they’re on the other side of the house, downstairs, I’m not that loud.’ Kellie reminded Teddy that on their honeymoon in the mountains

when she gave him a wedding gift by putting her legs behind her head now of his orgasm, he could be heard on the other side of the mountain, even the coyotes howl back.

Now I sit up all the way, scooting to the edge of the bed. I do not like the way; she is looking at me. I do not trust it.

‘What is this about, Hanna?’

‘Can you keep a secret?’ She repeats… I think of standing with her in front of the labs on Evaluation Day, the sun beating down on us, the way she

forced her mouth close to my ear to whisper about happiness, and unhappiness.

I am suddenly afraid for her, of her.

But I nod and say, ‘Yeah, of course.’

‘Okay.’

She looks down, fiddles with the hem of her shorts for a second take a deep breath.

‘So last week I met this guy-’

‘What?’ I nearly fall off the bed.

‘Relax.’ She holds up a hand.

‘He’s cured, okay? He works for the city.

He’s a sensor, actually.’

My heartbeat slows, and I settle back against her pillows again. ‘Okay- So…?’

‘So,’ Hanna says, looking for Kellie drawing the word out, ‘he was waiting at the doctor is with me. When I went to have my PT, you know?’ Hanna sprained her ankle in the fall

and still must do physical therapy once a week, to keep it strong. ‘Plus, we started chatting.’

Ray and not one girl but two and she, also is okay with it, they say at school.

Part: 2

It took twenty minutes for my heart to get back to normal. By the time I had caught my breath, I Kellie was up, singing and cooking. I need to research why men orgasm zap them of all their energy and women are reenergized. What is up with that!

Sometimes I feel as if I need a five emergency after sex while Hanna wants to play a game of basketball. After sex, I can hit the gym and do a ten-mile run.

Did Mother Nature intentionally give our sperm power to energize women?

Is this payback for them getting pregnant?

Doing!

Man, please.

Doing! If we answered a question doing sex the answer will always be yes. I cannot count how many men got engaged in doing sex.

After!

We all know immediately after men behave like aliens; we do not have a clue about anything on earth. I must stop typing now, here comes Hanna and Kellie, she told me when she and she got home from shopping she would give me a killer- blowjobs. Another thing, when we are horny, why do girls ask for things they know we would

deny after sex! Women are like, ‘I know he will not let me spend two hundred dollars on these shoes, so I’ll ask him while I’m giving him a blowjob, I’d better record it also, he won’t remember answering.’ Are we men being used regularly? I know I am. I cannot count the times Annie has said, ‘You told me I could.’ I ask when I did, I say you could? Her answer is always the same, ‘when we were in bed.’ Can we men pass a law stating no questions before, doing, or immediately after sex? Before, of course not, I would prefer

not to have any roadblocks down my avenue.

~*~

She pauses to look up and see what she was looking for. I do not see where the story is going as of now. Or how it relates to the music she was playing, so I just wait for her to go on, I see her there, can you?

To conclude she does… she is up there… ‘Besides, I was telling him about boards, and how I want to go to IUP, and he was- saying to me about his job, what he does; and such. You

know… the day to day, things that need to be done…

He codes the online access limitations, so the public can't just write whatever, or post things themselves, or write up false statistics or demagogic beliefs' - she puts this in quotes, rolling her eyes- 'and other stuff like that. He's, like, an intranet security guard.'

~*~

One of you may say, 'How could you forget about that!' But you need to understand the life and games I

played as an incredibly young man. I never told my best friend about this episode of my life. Not that it was bad, but it is hard to believe from two different points of view, not to mention how it all went down.

~*~

My first year in college was one of adventure and life lessons. Chuck and I behaved more like seniors than first-year students. We met two young ladies in our business management class. They were okay, but we were not interested in the relationship type of

friendship. Besides one, Sue was seeing someone in a nonseries way, meaning nothing was going on sexually, but they were going to the movies and doing other things just feeling each other out. The other one Tina, nice looking and very sexy to me was a loner. You know how you are saving for something and putting money in a jar. Well, I was doing that with Tina, only I was not putting the max in, just enough to keep me slowly going after my goal. I never went after Tina, but I teetered on the brink of flirting without flirting, just stringing her along.

Hanna- no make- up blonde and pink lips, short, looks a lot like Kellie just, washed out.

It was movie night at the 'Brick,' an outdoor spot we all gathered around daily. If you were looking for someone, go to the Brick. Chuck and I were just spending time together when Sue and Tina walked up. Tina walked up to me and asked what I was doing this weekend? I did not have anything going on, so I told her I will just be hanging around looking for something. Tina laughed and asked, 'what does

that mean?' I said, 'you know guy stuff.' Tina with her head down said, 'come to my apartment tomorrow night, Sue will be going out and you can show me guy stuff.' I just looked at her with that look of 'I'm not into games.' Tina looked up and told me not to eat, she will have pizza and salad for us. I did not even think about it, I just asked 'what time?'

~*~

I got back from the library of about five Saturday evening. Hanna left me a note saying he would not be back until Sunday evening. He got home late

last night so I figured he put something on layaway and went to get it today. My date with Tina was at eight so I started to get ready, for what, I do not know. But as always, I will be ready for anything.

I arrived at Hanna's about 7:50- sh pm, she answered the door in those pj's women wear as pants. As I entered, Tina asked 'if I wanted to eat now or later?' I said, 'you told me not to eat, so I'm ready now.' I must admit, Hanna set a genuinely nice table. As we were eating Tina question me about

what exactly ‘hanging around looking for something’ meant so she will know what to expect. That comment made me think I am getting laid tonight.

I told Hanna it meant whatever I fall into, it is something to do. Then Hanna dropped a bomb on me, she asked ‘would you like to fall into me?’ I have been here before, so I shot back, ‘Are you serious, if you are, why me?’ Tina smiled and spoke.

‘You don’t want me?’ Now all players should have a ‘cool card to play.’ I stood up and started to

unbutton my shirt, Hanna shouted whoa, not in here. I just smiled.

I stood there with my hands still on the buttons of my shirt. Hanna walked over and grabbed my hand and led me to her bedroom. I not sure what I was accustomed to, then again Hanna's room smells like the perfume counter in a department store. She left the lights off, it took me a while to adjust to the darkness but the little I could make out of Ray's nakedness was terribly exciting.

I was undressed in a little over 2.7 seconds. Not a word was spoken, I reached for her and started to kiss her passionately. Oh, I forgot, my penis was hard as steel before I got undressed. As I laid on back on her bed, she and Kellie grabbed my penis at their wanting and started to feel all around it, that did not bother me, I am going in. Then the first of two unbelievable hit me. I pushed me off and said, ‘I can’t do this.’ Shocked I asked, ‘did I get ahead of myself?’

I was quiet, not a word. I waited to hope to hear her say, okay I am ready, but no, still nothing. Then finally she spoke, I am a virgin, and I cannot handle you. I have had a few virgins before; I know how to handle them. I told I will be gentle, but she was adamant; no- I cannot, I know I cannot handle it, teach me to suck you,

I will do that for you, but I cannot handle your dick, I know I cannot. Well, I am on the brink now, it would not take much to finish me off. I asked, ‘if she was sure about this?’ She

told me never to do it before but teach me and I will do it for you.

Well, it only took five minutes for my load to unload in a newcomer mouth that was not bad, not bad at all. I did not even spit it out, she swallows it and started to apologize to me. I said it is ok when you read some guy will be incredibly lucky. Tina said I wanted that guy to be you so bad- but-but- I knew I could not handle it and I wanted to enjoy it as much as you.

Early the next morning I got a call from Sue, she wanted to know if

she could come over, I told her about last night. I said sure, come on over. I knew I told her about not having sex, but did she say anything about the blowjob.

Sue got to my apartment in twenty minutes. She went right into what Hanna told her about not having sex because she did not think she could handle it. But what blew my mind, she told her about sucking me off. She told me she needed to see what scared Tina so. I laughed and said I am not going to

show you, my privates, I am not into playing like that.

Sue said who is playing, I want to experience it.

The second of two unbelievable. Tina- for Tinareria- as I laid in bed exhausted from what she just put me through and watching her get dressed. She must be in a joking mood, she told me our secret will never leave her and she will leave the blowjob cumshot to me for now, that way she will have something on her, but after you have sex with her, I will want to

suck you off. I said- ‘You think I have a chance with her?’ She said… ‘oh I’m going to push her to have sex with you even though she’s right, you do carry a load down there, but I need to hear her talk about you so- I can relive this experience.’

She was right, two days later I told me to come over and finish what she stopped. Some years later and in passing she said ‘no one has come close to your manliness. All I could think about was not getting that blowjob from Sue that she promised me. ‘Okay,’

I say again… I want to tell Hanna to get to the point- I know all about online security restrictions, everybody does- but that would just make her clam up.

She sucks in a deep breath and look down in a wondering thought of what if. ‘But he doesn’t just code the security. He checks for lapses- like, break-ins. Hackers who jump through all the security hoops and manage to post their stuff. The government calls them floaters- websites that might be up for an hour, or a day, or two days before they’re discovered, websites full

of unlawful stuff- opinions and message boards and video clips and music.'

'And you found one.'

A sick feeling has settled in my stomach. Words keep flashing in my brain, like a neon sign going in and out: illegal, interrogation, surveillance.

Hanna…

She does not seem to notice that I have gone still. Her face is suddenly animated, as alive, and energetic as I have ever seen it, and she leans forward on her knees, talking

in a rush. ‘Not just one. Dozens. There are tons of them out there if you know how to look. If you know where to look. It is incredible,

Kellie. All these people- they must be all over the country- sneaking in through the loops, and the holes. You should see some of the things people write.

About- about the cure. It is not just the invalids who do not believe in it. There are people here, all over the place, whom- don’t think-’ I’m staring at her so hard she drops her eyes and

switches topics. ‘Besides, you should hear music. Incredible, amazing music, like nothing you have ever heard, music that almost takes your head off, you know? That makes you want to scream and jump up and down and break stuff and cry.’

Hanna’s room is big- almost twice as big as my room at, home- but as though the walls are pressing down around me. If the air-conditioning’s still working, I can no longer feel it. The air feels hot and heavy, like a wet breath, and I stand up and move to the window.

Hana breaks off, finally. I try to shove open her window, but it will not budge.

I push and strain against the windowsill.

‘Lena,’ Hana says timidly, after a minute.

‘It won’t open.’ All I can think of is I need air. The rest of my thoughts are a blur of radio static, and fluorescent lights, as well as lab coats to steel tables and surgical knives- an image of Willow Marks getting dragged off to the labs, screaming, her house defaced with marker and paint.

‘Kellie,’ Hana says, louder now.

‘Come on.’

You and she okay with sharing her boy- she into girls too?

‘It’s stuck. Wood must be warped from the heat. If it would just open.’ I heave and the window flies upward, finally. There is a popping sound, and the latch that has been keeping it in place snaps off and skitters to the middle of the floor. For a second Hanna, and I both stand there, staring at it. The air coming through

the open window does not make me feel better.

It is even hotter outside.

‘Sorry,’ I mumble. I cannot look at her.

‘I didn’t mean to- I didn’t know it was locked. The windows at my house don’t lock.’

‘Don’t worry about the window. I don’t care about the stupid window.’

‘One- time Grace got out of her crib when she was little, almost made it onto the roof. Just slid the window right

open and started climbing.' 'Kellie.' Hanna reaches out and grabs my shoulders. I do not know if I have a fever or what, going hot and cold every five seconds, but her touch makes a chill go through me and I pull away quickly.

'You're mad at me.'

'I'm not mad. I'm worried about you.'

But that is only half- true. I am mad- furious.

All this time I have been blindly coasting along, the idiot sidekick, thinking about our last real summer together, stressing about the matches I will get and evaluations, and boards and normal stuff and she has been nodding, smiling, and saying, ‘Uh-huh, yes, me too,’ and ‘I’m sure things will be fine,’ and meanwhile, behind my back, she has been turning into someone I do not know- someone with secrets, and weird habits and opinions about things we are not even supposed to think about.

Now- I know why, I was so startled on Evaluation Day, when she turned back to whisper to me, eyes huge and glowing. It was like she had dropped away for a second- my best friend, my only real friend- and in her place, was a stranger.

Part: 3

That is what has been happening all this time: Hana has been morphing into a stranger.

I turn back to the window… and… a sharp blade of sadness goes

through me- deep, and quick. It was bound to happen eventually.

I have always known it would. Everyone you trust, everyone you think you can count on, will eventually disappoint you. When left to their own devices, people lie and keep secrets, change, and disappear, some of a different face or personality, some behind a dense early morning fog, beyond a cliff. That is why the cure is so important.

That is why we need it.

‘Listen, I’m not going to get arrested just for looking at some websites. Or listening to music, or whatever.’

‘You could… People have been arrested for less.’

She knows this too. She knows and does not care.

‘Yeah, well, I’m sick of it.’ Hanna’s… voice trembles a little, which throws me.

I have never heard her sound- yet I was less than certain.

‘We shouldn’t even be talking about this. Someone could be-’

‘Someone could be listening?’

She cuts me off, finishes my sentence for me.

‘God, Kellie… I am sick of that, too… Are not you…?

Ant- U- sick of always checking your back, looking behind you, watching what you say, think, do. I cannot- I cannot breathe, I cannot sleep, I cannot move. I feel like there are walls everywhere. Everywhere I go - bam! There is a wall.

‘Everything I want- bam! Another wall… like ripped out.’

She rakes a hand through her hair. Like- for once, she does not look as pretty to me, and in control. She looks pale and unhappy, and her expression reminds me of something, but I cannot place it right away.

Part: 4

‘It’s for our protection,’ I say, wishing I sounded more confident. I have never been good in a fight.

‘Everything will get better once we’re-’

Again, she jumps in.

‘Once we’re cured?’

She laughs, a short barking sound with no humor in it, but at least she does not contradict me directly.

‘Right. That’s what everybody says.’

Suddenly it hits me: She reminds me of the animals we saw once on a class trip to the slaughterhouse. All the cows were lined up, packed in

their stalls, staring at us mutely as we walked by, with that same look in their eyes- with fear, and resignation and something else.

Desperation, I am scared, then, and truly terrified for her.

Then when she speaks again, she sounds a little bit calmer.

‘Maybe it will. Get better, I mean once we are cured. But until then - This is our last chance, Lena.

Our last chance to do anything. Our last chance to choose.’

There is the word from Evaluation Day again- choose- but I nod- because I do not want to set her off again.

‘So, what are you going to do?’

She looks away, biting her lip, and I can tell she is debating whether to trust me. ‘There’s this party tonight -’

‘What?’ Shoot up… the fear floods back in. She rushes on. ‘It’s something I found on one of the floaters- it’s a music thing, a few bands

playing out by the border in Stroud water, on one of the farms.'

'You can't be serious. You are not- you are not going, right?

You're not even thinking about it.'

'It's safe, okay? I promise. These websites - it is amazing, Liv, I swear you would be into it if you looked. They are hidden… Links, usually, embedded on normal pages, approved government stuff, then again, I do not know, somehow you can tell they do not feel right, you know? They

don’t belong.’ I grasp at a single word. ‘Safe? How can it be safe? That guy you met- the censor whole job is to track down people- who are stupid enough to post these things…’

‘They’re not stupid, they’re incredibly smart, actually…’

‘Not to mention the regulators, also the guards and the youth guard and curfew, besides segregation and just about everything else; that makes this one of the worst ideas.’

‘Fine… it was said…’

Hanna raises her arms and brings them slapping down against her thighs. The noise is so loud it makes me jump.

‘Fine, so-o it’s a bad idea, so-o it’s risky.

You know what…? I don’t care…’

For a second there’s silence… We are glaring at each other, and the air between us feels charged and dangerous, a thin electrical coil, ready to explode.

‘What about me?’ I say finally, struggling to keep my voice from shaking.

‘You’re welcome to come. Ten thirty, Roaring Brooke Farms, Stroud water.

Music…

Dancing…

You know- fun…

The stuff we’re supposed to be having before they cut out half of our brain.’

I ignore the last part of her comment. ‘I don’t think so, Hanna. In case you have forgotten, we have other plans for tonight. Have had plans for tonight for, oh, the past fifteen years.’ ‘Yeah, well, things change.’ She turns her back to me, but I feel like she is reached out and punched me in the stomach.

Part: 5

‘Fine…’ My throat is squeezing up. This time, I know it is authentic, and I am on the verge of crying. I go over to her bed and start gathering up

my stuff. Of course, my bag has spilled over on its side, and now her comforter is covered with little scraps of paper and gum wrappers, coins, and pens. I start stuffing this back into my bag, fighting back the tears. ‘Go ahead. Do whatever you want tonight. I don’t care.’

Hanna feels bad because her voice softens a little bit looking at Kellie. Both loving themselves him and each other ‘Seriously, Kelly… you should think about coming.

We won’t get in any trouble, I promise.’

‘You can’t promise that.’ I take a deep breath, wishing my voice would stop quivering.

‘You don’t know that. You cannot be positive. ‘

‘And you can’t go on being so scared all the time.’

That is, it: That does it. I whirl around, furious, something deep, black, and old rising inside of me. ‘Of course, I’m scared.

And I am right to be scared. And if you are not scared it is just because you have the perfect little life, and the perfect little family, and for you, everything is perfect, perfect, perfect.

You do not see it. You don't know.' 'Perfect? That is what you think? You think my life is perfect?' Her voice is quiet but full of anger.

I am tempted to move away from her but force myself to stay put. 'Yeah. I do.'

Again, she lets out a barking laugh, a quick explosion. ‘So-o, you think this is it, huh? As good as it gets?’ She turns a full circle, arms extended like she is embracing the room, the house, everything.

Her question startles me. ‘What else is there?’

‘Everything, Lena.’ She shakes her head. ‘Listen, I’m not going to apologize. I know you have your reasons for being scared. What happened to your mom was terrible-’

‘Don’t bring my mom into this.’ My body goes tight, electric.

‘But you can’t go on blaming her for everything. She died more than ten years ago.’ Anger swallows me, a thick fog. My mind careens wildly like wheels over ice, bumping up against random words:

Fear… Blame… Do not forget… Mom… I love you… and now, I see that Hanna is a snake

- has been waiting a long time to say this to me, has been waiting to squirm her way in, as deep and painful

as she can go, and bite. ‘Fuck you.’ In the end, these are the two words that come.

She holds up both hands. ‘Listen, Lena, I’m just saying you have to let it go. You are nothing like her. And you are not going to end up like her. You don’t have it in you.’

‘Fuck you.’ She is trying to be nice, but my mind is closed, and the words come out on their own, cascading over one another, and I wish every single one was a punch so that I

could hit her in the face, bam- bam- bam- bam.

‘You don’t know a single thing about her. And you do not know me. You don’t know anything.’

‘Lena.’ She reaches for me.

‘Don’t touch me.’ I am stumbling backward, grabbing my bag, bumping against her desk- as I move toward the door.

Hands In

Part: 1

Kellie- WHAT IF HE GETS US ALL

PREGNANT? ~US~ 3 GIRLS AT THE SAME DAMN TIME? WHAT IF…? THAT IS SOME FREAKED-UP SHIT- NO?

I the one that is really into him- his voice has gotten super quiet, and he seems to have forgotten that I am there. I am not exactly sure where his story is going but I hold my breath, afraid that if- I even so- much as exhale he will stop speaking entirely.

‘I hated it here. I hated it here so much you cannot even imagine. All the buildings and the people looking so dazed and the smells and the closeness of everything and the rules everywhere you turned, rules and walls, rules, and walls.

I was not used to it. I felt like I was in a cage. We are in a cage: a bordered cage.’

A little shock pulse through me. In all the seventeen years and eleven months of my life, I have never, not once, thought of it that way. I have

been so used to thinking of what the borders are keeping out that-

I have not considered that they are also penning us in. Now I see it through Kellie's eyes, see what it must have been like for him.

‘At first, I was angry. I used to light things on fire. Paper, handbooks, school primers. It made me feel better somehow.’ He laughs softly. ‘I used to walk along the borders for hours every day. Sometimes I cried.’ He squirms next to me, and I can tell he is embarrassed.

It is the first sign he has given in a while that he knows I am still there, that he is talking to me, and the urge to reach out and grab his hand, to squeeze him and her or give him or her encouragement, is almost overwhelming.

But- I keep my hands glued to the floor.

‘After a while, though, I would just walk. I liked to watch the birds. They would lift off from our side and soar over into the Wilds, as easily as anything. Back and forth, back, and

forth, lifting and curling through the air. I could watch them for hours at a time. Free:

They were free. I had thought that nothing and nobody was free in Pittsburgh, but

I was wrong. There were always the birds.'

He falls silent for a while, and I think he has done with his story. I wonder if he is forgotten about my original question- why me? But I am too embarrassed to remind him, so I just sit there and imagine him standing at the

border, motionless, watching the birds swoop above his head. It calms me down.

After what seems like forever, he starts talking again, this time in a voice so quiet I must shift nearer to him just to hear. ‘The first time- I saw you, at the Governor, I hadn’t been to watch the birds at the border in years. But that is what you reminded me of. You were jumping up, and you were yelling something, and your hair was coming loose from your ponytail, and you were so fast.’ He shakes his head. ‘Just a

flash, and then you were gone. Exactly like a bird.'

I do not know how I had not intended to move and had not noticed moving- but somehow, we have ended up face- to- face in the dark, only inches apart.

'Everyone is asleep… they've been asleep for years. You seemed - awake.' Alex is whispering now. He closes his eyes, opens them again. 'I'm tired of sleeping.' My insides are lifting and fluttering like they have done what he said and been transformed into

swooping, soaring birds: The rest of my body seems to be floating away on massive currents of warmth, as though a hot wind is pushing through me, breaking me apart, turning me to air.

This is wrong, a voice says inside of me, but it is not my voice. It is someone else's- some composite of my aunt, and Rachel, and all my teachers, and the pitchy evaluator who asked most of the questions the second time around.

Aloud I squeak, 'No,' even though another word is rising and

lifting inside of me, bubbling up like freshwater sprung from the earth. Yes, yes, yes.

'Why?' He is barely whispering. His hands find my face, his fingertips barely skim my forehead, the top of my ears, the hollows of my cheeks. Everywhere he touches is fire. My whole body is burning up, the two of us becoming twin points of the same bright white flame.

'What are you afraid of?' 'You have to understand. I just want to be happy.' I can barely get the words out.

My mind is a haze, full of smoke- nothing exists but his fingers dancing and skating over my skin, through my hair. I wish it would stop. I want it to go on forever. ‘I just want to be normal, like everybody else.’ ‘Are you sure that being like everybody else will make you happy?’ The barest whisper; his breath on my ear and neck, his mouth grazing my skin.

And I think then I might have died. The dog bit me and I got clubbed on the head and this is all just a dream-

the rest of the world has dissolved. Only him. Only me. Only us.

~*~

The sunlight filters through the trees and spots the grass a pale white. The whole garden feels as cool and quiet as the library at school. Enormous overgrown lawn winds between ancient trees, so thick and gnarled and knotted their arms twist overhead and form a canopy.

Ray brings a blanket and leaves it inside the house. Whenever we come, we take it and shake it out on the grass,

and all three of us lie there, sometimes for hours, talking and laughing about nothing.

Sometimes, Hanna or Kellie buys some food for a picnic, and one time I manage to swipe three cans of soda and a whole carton of candy bars from my uncle's store, and we get crazy on a sugar high and play games like we did when we were little- hide- and- seek and tag and leapfrog. Some of the tree trunks are as wide as four garbage pails mashed together, and I take a picture of Hana, laughing, trying to fit

her arms around one of them. Ray says the trees must have been here for hundreds of years, which makes Hanna and me go silent. That means they were here before- before the borders were shut down before the walls were put up before the disease was driven into the Wilds.

When he says it, something aches in my throat? I wish I could know what it was like then. Most of the time, though, Ray and I spend time alone and Hanna covers for us.

After weeks and weeks of not seeing her at all, suddenly I am going to Hana's every single day and sometimes twice in one day (when I see Ray; and then when- I see Hanna.) Fortunately, my aunt does not pry. I am happier than I can ever remember being. I am happier than I can ever remember even dreaming of being, and when I tell Hana I can never in a million years repay her for covering for me, she just crooks her mouth into a smile and says, 'You've already repaid me.' She assumes we had a fight and

are making up for lost time now, which is true anyway and suits me fine.

I am not sure what she means by that, but I am only glad to have her back on my side.

When Ray and I are alone we do not do much- just sit and talk- but still time seems to shrivel away, fast as paper catching on fire.

One minute it is three o’clock in the afternoon. The next minute, I swear, the light is draining from the sky and its curfew. That is okay… I am not sure I want to know. When he mentions

the need for resistance, there is a tightness in his voice, and anger coiling underneath his words. At those times, and only for a few seconds, I am still afraid of him, still, hear the word Invalid drumming in my ear.

~*~

Ray tells me stories about his life: about his ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle,’ and some of the work they do, although he is still vague about what the sympathizers and the Invalids are aiming for and how they are working to achieve it. But mostly Ray tells me

normal stuff, about his aunt's and how whenever they get together his uncle gets a little too tipsy and tells the same stories about the past over and over.

They are both cured, and when I ask him whether they are not happier now, he shrugs and says, 'They miss the pain, too.'

This seems incredible to me, and he looks at me out of the corner of his eye and says, 'That's when you lose people, you know. When the pain passes.'

Mostly, though, he talks about the Wilds and the people who live there, and I lay my head on his chest and close my eyes and dream of it: of a woman everyone calls Crazy Caitlin, who makes enormous wind chimes out of scrap metal and crushed soda cans; of Grandpa, who must be at least ninety- two but still hikes through the woods every day, foraging for berries and wild animals to eat; of campfires outside and sleeping under the stars, and staying up late to sing and talk and eat, while the night sky goes smudgy with smoke.

I know that he still goes back there sometimes, and I know he still considers it his real home. He nearly says as much when I tell him one time that I am sorry I cannot go home with him to check out his studio on Grand Street, where he has lived since starting at the university- if any of his neighbors saw me going into the building with him, we would be finished.

But he corrects me quickly,

‘That’s not home.’

He admits that he and the other Invalids have found a way to get in and out of the Wilds, but when I press him for details he clams up.

‘Someday maybe you’ll see,’ is all he says, and I am equal parts terrified and thrilled.

Part: 2

‘I don’t know any other way.’ I cannot feel my mouth open, do not feel the words come, but there they are, floating in the dark.

He says, ‘Let me show you.’

And then we are kissing. Or at least, we are kissing I have only seen it done a couple of times, quickly closed-mouth pecks at weddings or on formal occasions. But this is not like anything I have ever seen, or imagined, or even dreamed: This is like music or dancing but better than both. His mouth is slightly open, so I open mine, too. His lips are soft, the same soft pressure as the quietly insistent voice in my head that keeps saying yes. I like you, Lena. Do you believe me now?

Yes.

Can I walk you home?

Yes.

Can I see you tomorrow?

Yes, yes, yes. The streets are empty by now. The whole city is silent and still. The whole city might have wound down into nothing, burned away while we were in the shed, and I would not have noticed or cared. The walk home is fuzzy, a dream. He holds my hand the whole way and we stop to kiss twice again in the longest, deepest

shadows we can find. Both times I wish the shadows were solid, had weight, and they would fold down around us and bury us there, so we could stay like that forever, chest to chest, lip to lip.

The warmth is only growing inside of me, waves of light swelling and breaking, and making me feel like I am floating. His fingers lace my hair, cup my neck and the back of my head, skim over my shoulders, and without thinking about it or meaning to, my hands find his chest, move over the heat of his skin, the bones of his

shoulder blades like wingtips, the curve of his jaw, just stubble with hair- all of it strange and unfamiliar and gloriously, deliciously new. Both times my chest seize up when he pulls away and takes my hand and we must start walking again, not kissing like suddenly I can only breathe correctly when we are.

Somehow- too soon- I am home and whispering goodbye to him and feeling his lips brush mine one last time, as light as wind. My heart is drumming in my chest so hard it aches,

but it is the good kind of ache, like the feeling you get on the first day of real autumn when the air is crisp, and the leaves are all flaring at the edges and the wind smells just vaguely of smoke- like the end and the beginning of something all at once. Under my hand, I swear I can feel his heart beating out a response, an immediate echo of mine, as though our bodies are speaking to each other.

And suddenly it is all so ridiculously and stupidly clear I want to laugh.

This is what I want. This is the only thing I have ever wanted. Everything else - every single second of every single day that has come before this very moment, this kiss- has meant nothing.

Part: 3

When he finally pulls away it is like a blanket has come down over my brain, quieting all my buzzing thoughts and questions, filling me with a calm and happiness as deep and cool as snow. The only word left there is yes. Yes, to everything.

Then I am sneaking into the house and up the stairs and into the bedroom, and it is not until I have been lying in bed for a long time, shivering, aching, missing him already, that I realize my aunt and my teachers, and the scientists are right about the deliria.

As I lie there with the hurt driving through my chest and the sick, anxious feeling churning through me and the desire for Ray so strong inside of me it is like a razor blade edging its way through my organs, shredding me,

all I can think is: It will kill me, it will kill me, it will kill me. And I do not care.

Last God created Adam and Eve, to live together happily as spouses: eternal partners. They lived peacefully for years in a beautiful garden full of tall, straight plants that grew in neat rows, and well- behaved animals to serve as pets. Their minds were as clear and untroubled as the pale and cloudless blue sky, which hung like a canopy over their heads.

They were untouched by illness, pain, or desire.

They did not dream. They did not ask questions. Each morning they woke as refreshed as newborns. Everything was always the same, but it always felt new and good.

The next day, a Saturday, I wake up thinking of Alex. Then I try to stand up, and pain shoots through my leg. Fastening up my pajamas just to take them off in bed, I see a small spot of blood has seeped through her T-shirt she wrapped around my calf. I know I

should wash it, change the bandage, or do something, but I am too scared to see how bad the damage is.

The details from the party- of screaming and shoving and dogs and batons whirling through the air, deadly- come flooding back, and for a moment I am sure I am going to be sick.

Then the dizziness subsides, and I think of Hana.

Our phone is in the kitchen. My aunt is at the sink, washing dishes, and gives me a small look of surprise when I come downstairs. I catch a glimpse of

myself in the hallway mirror. I look terrible- hair sticking up all over my head, big bags under my eyes- and it strikes me as unbelievable that anyone could ever find me pretty.

But someone does. Thinking of Hanna makes a golden glow spread through me.

‘Better hurry,’ Carol says. ‘You’ll be late for work. I was just about to wake you.’

‘I just have to call Hana,’ I say. I snake the cord as far as it will go and

back up into the pantry, so at least I will have some privacy.

Part: 4

My fingers have begun to shiver, I hang up rapidly, and I have trouble punching in Hanna’s cell phone number.

Straight to voicemail.

I try Hanna’s house first. One, two, three, four, five rings. Then the answering machine clicks on. ‘You’ve reached the Tate residence. Please

leave a message of no more than two minutes-’

Her greeting is the same as it’s always been (‘Hey, sorry I couldn’t get to the phone. Or I am not sorry I could not get to the phone- it depends on who is calling.’), her voice coming in fuzzy, bubbling with suppressed laughter. Hearing it- the normalcy of it - after last night gives me a jolt, like suddenly dreaming yourself back into a place you have not thought about for a while. I remember the day she recorded it. It was after school and we were in her

room, and she went through about a million greetings before she settled on that one. I was bored and kept whacking her with a pillow whenever she wanted to try just one more.

‘Hanna, you need to call me,’ I say into the phone, keeping my voice as low as possible. I am far too aware that my aunt is listening. ‘I’m working today. You can reach me at the store.’ I hang up, feeling dissatisfied and guilty. While I was in the shed last night with Alex, she could have been hurt or in

trouble; I should have done more to find her.

‘Rachel.’ My aunt calls me sharply back into the kitchen just as I am headed upstairs to get ready.

‘Yes?’

She comes forward a few steps. Something in her expression makes me anxious.

‘Are you hobbling?’ she asks. I have been annoying as hard as possible to walk generally.

I look away. It is easier to lie when I am not staring into her eyes. ‘I don’t think so.’ ‘Don’t lie to me.’ Her voice turns cold. ‘You think I don’t know what this is about, but I do.’ For one terrifying second, she is going to ask me to roll up my pajama pants or tell me she knows about the party. But then she says, ‘You have been running again, haven’t you? Even though I told you not to.’ ‘Only once,’ I blurt out, relieved. ‘I think I may have twisted my ankle.’

Carol shakes her head and looks disappointed. ‘Honestly, Lena. I do not know when you started disobeying me. I thought that you of all people-’ She breaks off. ‘Oh, well. Only five weeks to go, right? Then all of this will be worked out.’

‘Right…’ I force myself to smile. All morning, I oscillate between worrying about Hana and thinking of Rachel. I ring up the wrong charge for customers twice and must call for Jed, my uncle’s general manager, to come to override it. Then I knock down a whole

shelf of frozen pasta dinners and mislabel a dozen cartons of cottage cheese. Thank God my uncle's not in the store today; he is out doing deliveries, so it is just her and me. And she- Hanna hardly looks at me or speaks to me except in grunts, so I am sure he is not going to notice that I have suddenly turned into a clumsy, incompetent mess.

I know part of the problem, of course.

The disorientation, the distraction, the difficulty focusing- all

classic Phase One signs of deliria. But I do not care. If pneumonia felt this good, I would stand out in the snow in the winter with bare feet and no coat on, or march into the hospital and kiss her patients. I have told Hanna about my work schedule, and we have agreed to meet up at Back Cove directly after my shift, at six o'clock. The minutes crawl toward noon. I swear I have never seen time go more slowly. It is like every second needs encouragement just to click forward to the next. I keep willing the clock to go faster, but it seems to be resisting me deliberately.

I see a customer picking her nose in the tiny aisle of (kind of) fresh produce; I look at the clock; look back at the customer; look back at the clock and the second hand still has not moved. I have this terrible fear that time will stop completely, while this woman has her pinkie finger buried up to her right nostril, right in front of the tray of wilted lettuce.

At noon I get a fifteen-minute break, and I go outside and sit on the sidewalk and choke down a few bites of a sandwich, even though I am not

hungry. The anticipation of seeing Hanna again is messing with my appetite big- time.

Another sign of deliria. Bring it. The droning of the fly and the tiny fan whirring behind my back and the heat all make me want to sleep. If I could, I would rest my head on the counter and dream, and dream, and dream. I would dream I was back in the shed with Rachel. I would dream of the firmness of his chest pressed against mine and the strength of his hands and his voice saying, ‘Let me show you.’

The bell above the door chimes once and I snap out of my reverie. At one o’clock Kellie flinches replenishing the shelves, and I am still stuck behind the counter.

It is mischievously hot, and there is a fly trapped in the store that keeps buzzing around and bumping up against the overhanging shelf above my head, where we keep a few packs of cigarettes and bottles of Jack and things like that. And there he is, walking through the door with his hands stuffed in the pockets of a pair of

raggedy board shorts, and his hair sticking up all crazy around his head like it is made from leaves and twigs. Kellie, I nearly topple off my stool.

He shoots me a quick sideways grin and then starts walking the aisles lazily, picking up random things- like a bag of pork skin cracklings and a can of gross cauliflower soup- and making exaggerated noises of interest, like 'This looks delicious,' so it is all I can do to keep from cracking up laughing. He must squeeze by Jed at one point- the aisle at the store is narrow, and

Ray’s not exactly a lightweight- and when Jed barely glances at him, a thrill shoot through me. He does not know. Kellie does not know that I can still taste Hanna’s lips against mine, can still feel his hand sliding over my shoulders.

For the first time in my life, I have done something for me and by choice and not because somebody told me it was good or bad. As Hanna walks through the store, there is an invisible thread tethering us together, and

somehow it makes me feel more powerful than ever before.

Finally, Hanna comes up to the counter with a pack of gum, a bag of chips, and a root beer.

‘Will that be all?’ I say, careful to keep my voice steady. But I can feel the color rising in my cheeks. His eyes are amazing today, almost pure gold.

He nods…

‘That’s all.’ I ring him up, my hands shaking, desperate to say something more to him but worried

that Rachel will hear. At that moment, another customer comes in, an older man who has the look of a regulator. So, I count out Hanna’s change as slowly and carefully as I can, trying to keep him standing in front of me for as long as possible. But there are only so many ways you can count change for a five-dollar bill. Eventually, I pass him his change, giving an old fashioned two-dollar bill with red numbers on it, then with one. Our hands connect as I place the bills in his palm, and a shock of electricity goes through me. I want

to grab him, pull him toward me, kiss him right there.

‘Have a wonderful day.’ My voice sounds high- pitched, strangled. I am surprised I can even get the words out.

‘Oh, I will.’ He shoots me his amazing, crooked smile as he backs up toward the door.

‘I’m going to Cove.’

And then he is gone, pivoting out into the street. I try to watch her go, but the sun blinds me as soon as

she is out the door and he turns into a flashing, blurry shadow, wavering and endangered.

I cannot stand it. I hate thinking of him weaving through the streets, getting farther and farther away. Besides, I have five more hours to get through beforehand I am supposed to meet her. I will never make it.

Before- I can think about what I am doing, I duck around the counter, peeling off the apron I have been wearing since dealing with seepage in

one of the freezer suitcases. ‘Kellie, grab the register for a second, okay?’ I call.

He blinks at me perplexedly. ‘Where are you going?’ ‘Customer,’ I say. ‘I gave him the wrong change.’

‘But-,’ Kellie starts to say aloud. I do not stop to hear his objections. I can imagine what they will be, anyway. But you counted his change for five minutes. Oh well. So, she will think I am stupid. I can live with it.

Down the street Hanna is paused on the corner, waiting for a city truck to grumble past me and us- so we.

‘Hey!’ I shout out, and he turns. A woman pushing a stroller on the other side of the street stops raises her hand to shield her eyes and follows my progress down the street. I am going as fast as I can, but the pain in my leg makes it problematic to do more than shuffle along. I can feel the woman’s gaze pricking up and down my body like a series of needles.

Marcel- ‘There is nothing like the same as a girl’s lower lips! It just turns you on! So-o kissable- yah you like it, Karly.’

Karly- ‘Um-hum!’

‘I gave you the wrong change,’ I call out again, even though I am close enough to him now to speak normally. All being well it will get the lady off my back. But she keeps watching us.

‘You shouldn’t have come,’ I whisper when I catch up to him. I imaginary to press something into his hand. ‘I told you I’d meet you later.’ He

moves his hand easily to his pocket, picking up faultlessly on our little charade, and whispers back, ‘I couldn’t wait.’ Kelly waggles his hand in my face and looks stern like he is scolding me for being careless. But his voice is soft and sweet.

Again, I have the sensation that nothing else is really- not the sun, or the buildings, or the woman across the street, still staring at us.

Then I turn and limp back to the store. I cannot believe what I have just done. I cannot believe the risks I

am taking. But I need to see him. I need to kiss him. I need it as much as I have ever needed anything. I have that same pressing feeling in my chest like when I am at the very end of one of my sprints and I am just dying, screaming to stop, to catch my breath.

'Thanks,' I say to Jed, taking my spot behind the counter. 'There's a blue door around the corner, in the alley,' I say quietly as I back away, raising my hands like I am apologizing. 'Meet me there in five. Knock four

times.’ Then, more loudly, I say, ‘Listen, I’m sorry.

As I said, it was an honest mistake.’ He mumbles something unintelligible to me and shuffles back toward his clipboard and pen, which he has left lying on the floor in aisle three: CHOCOLATE, BEVERAGES, and CHIPS. The guy I made for a regulator has his nose buried in one of the freezer compartments. I am not sure whether he is looking for a frozen dinner or just taking advantage of the free chilly air.

Either way, as I look at him, I have a flashback to last night, to the whistling of the air as the clubs came down like scythes, and I feel a rush of hatred for him- for all of them. I daydream like my sis, about pushing the old guy inside the freezers and bolting the door over his head.

Thinking about the raids makes me anxious about Hana again. News of the raids is in all the papers. Hundreds of people all over Pittsburgh were taken last night to be interrogated, or summarily shipped off to the Vaults,

though I did not hear anyone reference the party in the Highlands specifically.

I tell myself if Kallie has not called me back by this evening, I will go to her house. I tell myself that in the meantime there is no point in worrying, but all the same, the guilty feeling keeps worming around in my stomach. The timeworn guy is still hovering over the freezer compartments and paying me no attention.

Good- I slip on the apron again, and then, after checking to see that Hanna is not watching, reach up and

grab all the bottles of ibuprofen- about a dozen of them- and slide them into the apron pocket. Then I sigh loudly. ‘Hanna, I need you to cover for me again.’ He looks up with those watery blue eyes. Blink, blink. ‘I’m reserving.’ ‘Well, we’re totally out of anesthetics back here. Didn’t you notice?’ He stares at me for several long seconds. I keep my hands clasped tightly behind my back. Else I am sure their trembling would give me away.

In conclusion- he shakes his head.

‘I’m going to see if I can dig some up in the supply room. Clutch the register, okay?’ I slip out from behind the counter slowly, so I do not commotion, keeping my body angled slightly away from her. With any godsend- she will not sign the bulge in my apron. This is one indication of the deliria no one ever tells you about: The disease turns you into a world-class liar.

I slip around a teetering pile of sagging cardboard boxes stacked at the back of the store and shoulder my way

into the supply room, shutting the door behind me.

Inopportunely it does not lock, so I drag a crate of applesauce in front of the door just in case Kellie decides to come to investigate when my search for the ibuprofen takes longer than usual.

A moment later there is a quiet tap on the door that leads out into the alley.

Beat, rap, knock, blow, and tap. The door feels weightier than usual. It takes all my strength just to yank it open.

‘I said to knock four times-’ I am saying, as the sun cuts into the room, temporarily dazzling me. And then the words dry up in my throat and I nearly choke.

‘Hey,’ Rachel says. She is standing in the alley, shifting from foot to foot, looking pale and worried. ‘I was hoping you’d be here.’

For a second, I cannot even answer her.

I am overwhelmed with relief- she is here, intact, whole, fine- and at the same time anxiety starts drumming

through me. I scan the alley besides no sign of me- Kelly. He saw Hana and got scared off.

‘Um-’ Rachel wrinkles her forehead.

‘Are you going to let me in, or what?’

‘Oh, sorry. Yes, come in.’ She scoots past me, and I shoot one last look up and down the alley before closing the door behind me. I am happy to see Hana but nervous, too. If Ray shows up while he is here- But he will not, I tell myself. He must have seen

her. He must know it is not safe to come now. Not that I am worried that Hanna would tell me, but still. After all the lectures- I gave her about safety and being reckless, I would not blame her for wanting to bust me.

'Hot in here,' Hanna says, lifting her shirt away from her back.

She is wearing a white billowy shirt and loose-fitting jeans with a thin gold belt that picks up the hue of her hair. Nonetheless, she looks apprehensive, besides tired, and thin. As she shots a circle, examination out

the pantry, I notice tiny scratches crisscrossing the backs of her arms. ‘Evoke when I used to come and hang out with you here? I would bring magazines and that stupid old radio I used to have? And you’d steal-’

‘Chips and soda from the cooler,’ I finish. ‘Yeah, I remember.’ That was how we got through summers in middle school when I first started logging time at the store. Five times- I used to fabricate reasons to come back here all the time, and Hana would show up at some point in the early afternoon

and knock on the door five times, soft. I should have known.

‘I got your message this morning,’ Hana says, turning toward me. Her eyes look even bigger than usual. It is that the rest of her face looks smaller, drawn inward somehow. ‘I walked by and didn’t see you at the register, so I figured I’d come around this way. I wasn’t in the mood to deal with your uncle.’

‘He’s not here today.’ I am beginning to relax. Ray would have

been here already if he were planning to come.

‘It’s just me and she.’

I am not sure if Ray hears me. Kellie- she is chewing on her thumbnail- a nervous habit I thought she had kicked years ago- and staring down at the floor like it is the fascinating bit of linoleum she is ever seen.

‘Hanna?’ I speak. ‘Are you okay?’ A massive shudder goes through her all at once, besides, her shoulders cave forward and she starts to sob. I

have seen Hana cry only twice in my life- once when someone pegged her directly in the stomach during dodgeball in second grade, and once last year, after we saw a diseased girl getting wrestled to the street by police in front of the labs, and they accidentally cracked her head so hard against the pavement we heard it up where we were standing, two hundred feet away- and for a moment I am frozen and unsure of what to do.

She does not bring her hands to her face or try to wipe her tears or

anything. She just stands there, shaking so hard I am worried she will fall over, her hands clenched at her sides.

Part: 5

I reach out and skim her shoulder with one hand. ‘Sh-h-h, Hanna. It’s okay.’ She jerks away from me. ‘It’s not okay.’ She draws a long, shaky breath and starts speaking in a rush: ‘You were right, Lena. You were right about everything. Last night- it was horrifying.

There was a raid… The party got broken up. Oh, God. People were screaming, and dogs- Liv, there was blood. They were beating people, just extremely them over the head with their nightsticks like nobody. Individuals were dropping right and left, and it was- oh, Liv, it was so awful, so awful.' Hana wraps her arms around her stomach plus doubles forward like she is about to be sick.

She starts to say something else, but the rest of her words get lost: Huge, shuddering sobs run through her

whole body. I step forward and wrap her in a hug. For a second, she tenses up- it is exceedingly rare for us to hug since it has always been discouraged- but then she relaxes and presses her face into my shoulder and lets herself cry. It is awkward since she is so much taller than I am; she must hunch over. It would be funny if it were not so awful.

'Sh-hh,' I say. 'Sh-hh. It's going to be okay.' But the words seem stupid even as I say them. I think of holding Grace in my arms and rocking her to

sleep, saying the same thing, as she screamed silently into my pillow. It is going to be okay. Words that mean nothing, really, just sounds intoned into vastness and darkness, little-scrabbling attempts to latch onto something when we are falling.

Hana says something else I do not understand. Her face is mashed into my shoulder blade and her words are garbled.

And then the knocking begins. Four soft but deliberate knocks, one right after the other.

Hanna and I step away from each other immediately. She draws an arm across her face, leaving a slick of tears from wrist to elbow.

‘What’s that?’ she says. Her voice is trembling.

‘What?’ My first thought is to pretend

I have not heard anything- and pray to God that Alex goes away.

Bash, bump, hit. Pause. Knock.

Yet once more…

‘That’ irritation creeps into Hanna’s voice. I guess I should be happy she is not crying anymore. ‘The knocking.’ She narrows her eyes, staring at me suspiciously. ‘I thought nobody comes in this way.’

‘They don’t, I mean- sometimes- I mean, the delivery guys-’ I am stumbling over my words, praying for Ray to go away, grasping for a lie that is not coming. So-o much for my newfound skills.

Rachel- Then Ray nudges his head in the door and calls out, ‘me?’ He

catches sight of Hana first and freezes, half- in and a half- out of the alley.

For a minute nobody speaks. Hana’s mouth falls open. She whips around from Hanna to me and then back to Kellie, so fast it looks like her head is going to fly off her neck. Hanna does not know what to do either. She just stands completely still, like she can go invisible if she does not move. And it is the ill-advised thing in the world, but all I can ejaculate out is, ‘You’re late now.’

Part: 6

All I want is you-you- and me-me and you! Is that a song?

Hanna McGruben III and Ray both express at formerly the same damn time.

‘You told him to meet you did you not?’ she says as he says so both run their words together and piss, ‘I got stopped by a fucking guard. Had to show my cards and piss.’ Hanna gets business- like all at once she is run her shit taking mouth like she in on the crapper just duping it out.

This is why- I admire her for having the runs, oh not that god: One second, she is sobbing hysterically, the next second, she is completely in control of her shit. ‘Come inside,’ she says, ‘and shut the back door up.’

Then he stands there awkwardly, lumbering his feet like she is holding in her piss which some girls just cannot do. Got it…? Yep…! His hair is sticking up all strangely, long points at the ends, and piss, and in that second, she looks so young and cute and nervous I have a crazy urge to walk

right up to him, in front of Hanna, and kiss him.

Nevertheless, she represses that urge quickly. She turns to me and folds her arms and gives me a look I swear she stole from Mrs. Dickson, the principal of St. Paul's.

The girls all say.

'You have some amplification to do.'

'Your middle name is Ellie?' Hanna blurts.

Hanna and I both shoot hair a death stare, and he takes a step backward dick slap would have been better, she said under her breath.

‘Um-’ Words still are not coming very easily. ‘Hanna, you hark back to Rachel.’

She keeps her arms locked in place and narrows her eyes. ‘Oh, I recollect Ray. What I don’t remember is why Hanna is here.’

‘He - well, he was going to drop off -’ I am still searching for a convincing explanation but as usual, my

brain picks that second to conveniently die on me. I look at Kellie weakly.

She gives a tiny shrug of her shoulders, and for a moment we just stare at each other.

I am still not used to seeing her looking at with love or lust in her eyes you pick which one she is giving me. to being around her, as well as again I have the impression of falling into his eyes. On the other hand, this time it is not dizzying.

It is the opposite- grounding, like she is whispering to me without a

word, proverbing she is there as well as she is with me, and we are fine.

'Tell her,' he says.

Hana leans up against the shelves stocked with toilet paper and canned beans, relaxing her arms just enough so I know she is not mad and gives me a look like, you better tell me.

So- I do. I am not sure how long we have until Jed gets tired of staffing the register by himself, so I try to keep it short. I tell her about running into Ray at Roaring Brooke Farms; I tell her about swimming out to the buoys

with him at East End Beach and what he told me when we were there. I choke a little bit on the word Invalid and Hana's eyes widen- just for a second, I see a look of alarm flash across her face- but she keeps it together well. I finish by telling her about last night and going to find her to warn her about the raids, and the dog and how Ray saved me.

When I describe hiding out in the shed, I get nervous again- I do not tell her about the kissing, but I cannot help but think about it - but Hana is

openmouthed again at that point, and obviously in shock, so I do not think she notices.

The only thing she says at the end of my story is: ‘So you were there? You were there last night?’ Her voice is weird and trembling, and I am worried she is going to start crying again. At the same time, I feel a tremendous rush of relief. She is not going to freak out about Ray or be mad that I did not tell her.

I nod…

She shakes her head, staring at me like she has never seen me before. ‘I can’t believe that. I can’t believe you snuck out during a raid- for me.’

‘Yeah, well.’ I shift uncomfortably. It feels like I have been talking for ages, and Hana and Ray have both been staring at me the whole time. My cheeks are flaming hot.

Just then there is a sharp knock on the door that opens to the store, and Jed calls out,

‘Liv? Are you in there?’

I was gesticulation hysterically to Ray. Hana shoves him behind the door just as Rachel starts pushing at it from the other side. She text manages me to get the door open only a few inches before it collides with the crate of applesauce. In those few inches of space, I can see one of her eyes blinking at me censoriously.

'What are you doing in there?' Hana pops her head around the door and waves. 'Hi, Rachel,' she says cheerfully, once again switching effortlessly into the cheerful public

mode. ‘I just came by to give Liv something.

And we started gossiping.’ ‘We have customers,’ Ray is say’s morosely.

‘I’ll be out in a second,’ I say, trying to match Hana’s tone.

The fact that Ray and his friends- are disconnected by only a few inches of plywood is terrifying. I mumble and depart, closing the door again. Hanna, Kellie, and I look at one another in a hush. All three of us breathe out at the same time, a combined sigh of relief.

The X’s and O’s haunt me as she does. Sing with me… When Ray speaks again, he keeps his voice to a soft voice. ‘I bought some things for your leg,’ he says. He takes the backpack off and sets it on the ground, he kneels in front of me, then starts, pulling out the hydrogen peroxide, bacitracin, bandages, adhesive tape, cotton balls.

‘Can I…?’ He speaks. I roll up my jeans at the waist, and he starts unwinding the strips of T-shirt.

I cannot believe Hana is standing there watching a boy- an Invalid- touch my skin. I know she would never in a million years have expected it, and I look away, embarrassed, and proud at the same time.

Hanna inhales sharply once the makeshift bandages come off my leg.

Without meaning to I have been squeezing my eyes shut.

‘Damn, Liv,’ she says. ‘That dog got you good.’

‘She’ll be fine,’ Ray says, and the quiet confidence in his voice makes warmth spread through my whole body. I crack open an eye and sneak a look at the back of my calf. My belly does a flop. It looks like an enormous chunk has been torn out of my leg, do you see this? A few square inches of skin are-like, only plain missing.

‘Maybe you should go to the hospital,’ Hana says doubtfully.

‘And tell them what?’ Ray uncaps the tube of peroxide and begins wetting cotton balls. ‘That she got hurt

during a raid on an underground party?’ Hana does not answer. She knows I cannot go to the doctor. I would be strapped down in the labs, or thrown in the

Vaults, before I could finish giving my name.

Part: 7

‘It doesn’t hurt that bad,’ I say, which is a lie. Hana again gives me that look, as we have never met before, and I realize that she is actually- and for the first time in our lives- impressed with me. In awe of me, even.

Alex dabs on a thick coat of antibacterial cream and then starts wrestling with the gauze and the adhesive tape. I do not have to ask where he got so many supplies. Another benefit of having security access in the labs, I assume.

Hana drops to her knees. ‘You’re doing it wrong,’ she says, and it is a relief to hear her normal, bossy tone. I almost laugh. ‘My cousin’s a nurse. Let me.’

She practically elbows him out of the way. Alex shuffles over and

raises his hands in surrender. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ he says, and then winks at me. Then I do start laughing. Fits of giggling overtake me, and I must clamp my hands over my mouth to keep from shrieking and gasping and blowing our cover. For a second Hana and Alex just stare at me, amazed, but then they look at each other and start grinning stupidly.

I know we are all thinking the same thing.

It is crazy. It is stupid. It is dangerous. But somehow, standing in

the sweltering storeroom surrounded by boxes of mac ’n’ cheese and canned beets and baby powder, the three of us have become a team.

It is us against them, three against countless thousands. But for some reason, and even though it is absurd, at that moment I feel damn good about our odds.

Unhappiness is bondage; therefore, happiness is freedom.

The way to find happiness is through the cure. Therefore, it is only

through the cure that one finds freedom.

- From Will It Hurt? Common Questions and Answers About the Procedure, 7th edition, Association of American Scientists, Official USA Government Agency Pamphlet After that I find a way to see Kellie every day, even on days I must work at the store. Sometimes Hanna comes along with us. We spend a lot of time at Back and Yellow Cove, mostly in the evenings after everyone has left. Since Kellie is on the books as cured, it is not

technically illegal for us to spend time together, but if anyone knew how much time we spent together- or saw us laughing and dunking and having water fights or racing down by the marshes- they would get suspicious.

So- when we walk through the city, we are careful to stand apart, Hana and I on one sidewalk, Ray on the other. Plus, we look for the emptiest streets, the rundown parks, the abandoned houses- places where we will not be seen.

We return to the houses in Deering Highlands. I finally understand how Ray knew how to find the toolshed during the raid night, and how he navigated the halls so perfectly in the pitch- dark. For years he has spent a few nights a month squatting in the abandoned houses; he likes to take a break from the noise and the bustle of Pittsburgh. He does not say so, but I know squatting must remind him of the Wilds.

One house becomes our favorite: 38 Highland Street, and long-

standing colonial that used to be home to a family of sympathizers. Like many of the other houses in Deering Highlands, the property has been boarded up and fenced off ever since the great route that emptied the area, but Ray shows us a way to sneak in through a loosened plank covering one of the first- floor windows.

It is strange: Even though the place has been looted, some of the bigger furniture and the books are still there, and if it were not for the smoke stains creeping up the walls and

ceilings, you might expect the owners to come home any moment. The first time we go, Hanna walks ahead of us calling, ‘Hello! Ciao!’ into the darkened rooms. I shiver in the sudden dark and coolness. After the blinding sunshine outside, it comes as a shock. Hanna pulls me closer to her. I am finally getting used to letting her touch me, and I do not recoil or whip around to look over my shoulder every time she leans in for a kiss.

Part: 8

‘Want to dance?’ He teases.

Kiss me, and you will see how significant I am.

‘Come on.’ I slap him away. It feels weird to talk loudly in such a quiet place. Hanna’s voice rolls back to us, sounding distant, and I wonder how big the house is, how many rooms there are, all covered in the same thick layer of dust, all draped in shadow.

‘I’m serious,’ he says. He spreads his arms.

‘It’s the perfect place for it.’

We are standing in the middle of what must once have been a beautiful living room.

It is mammoth- bigger than the whole ground floor of Hanna and our apartment. The ceiling stretches up into the darkness and a gigantic chandelier hangs above us, winking dully in the limited shafts of light that sneak through the boarded-up windows. If you listen hard, you can hear mice moving quietly in the walls. But somehow, it is not gross or frightening.

Somehow- it is nice, and it makes me think of woods and endless cycles of growth, death, and regrowth- like what we are hearing is the house folding down around us, centimeter by centimeter.

‘There’s no music,’ I say.

He shrugs, winks, holds out his hand.

‘Music is overrated,’ he says. I let him draw me toward him, so we are standing chest to chest. He is so much taller than I am, my head barely reaches his shoulder, and I can feel his

heart drumming through his chest, and it gives us all the rhythm we need.

~*~

My uncle could have gone anywhere north, south, or west. At least we know he did not go east; he would have ended up in the ocean. Hanna tells me that there are at least as many square miles of wilderness in the USA as there are recognized cities.

I tell Hana she cannot believe it either, this is so unbelievable to me that for a while I cannot believe it… can you?

~*~

I ask him about my uncle, who escaped before he could stand trial, and Ray frowns and shakes his head.

‘Hardly anybody goes by a real name in the Wilds,’ he says, shrugging. ‘He doesn’t sound familiar, though.’ But he explains that there are thousands and thousands of settlements all around the country.

Kellie is a good listener and a better kisser, too, and can stay silent for hours while I tell him about growing up in mom’s house, and how everybody

thinks Karly cannot speak and only I know the truth. He laughs a louden I describe Jenny whom I can only see, and her pinched look and old- lady face and habit of looking down her nose at me like I am the nine-year-old in my mind now like she was, when her brain dyed.

I feel comfortable talking about my mother with him too, and how it used to be when she was alive, and it was just the three of us- me, her, and Rachel. I tell him about the sock hops and the way my mom used to sing us

lullabies, even though I can only remember a few snatches of the songs. It is the way he listens so quietly, and stares at me steadily with his eyes bright and warm, and never judges me.

(The feeling passes) Or do they really- the warmth of his hands draws it out of me.

And, of course, we kiss. A unique time in my mind- I even tell him about the last thing my mom ever said to me, and he just sits and rubs my back when suddenly I feel like

I am about to cry. We kiss so much that when we are not kissing it feels weird like I get used to breathing through his lips and into his mouth. Slowly, as we get more comfortable, I start to explore other parts of her body too. The delicate structure of her ribs under her skin, her boobs and shoulders, butt, and vagina. She- there- like chiseled stone, the soft curls of pale hair on his legs, the way his skin always smells a little bit like the deep-sea- all beautiful and strange.

~*~

The first time I am shaking. Then I let him draw my whole shirt over my head and lie me down in the bright sunshine and just stare at me. Primary I will only let him pull my shirt aside and kiss my collarbone and shoulders. Even crazier is that I let him look at me, too.

Besides, I just know he is looking at me thinking I am wrong or deformed.

I am suddenly aware of how pale I look in the sunshine, and how many moles I have spotting up and

down my chest. I keep having the urge to cross my hands over my chest, to cover up my breasts, to hide.

~*~

‘Beautiful,’ But then he breathes, and when his eyes meet mine, I know that he really, truly means it.

Kiss this of mine- Kellie

Continued-

Part: 9

Marcel-

He said to me- Kiss this of mine…

That night, for the first time in my life, I stand in front of the bathroom mirror and do not see an in-between girl. For the first time, with my hair swept back and my nightgown slipping off one shoulder and my eyes glowing, what Marcel said. I am beautiful.

But it is not just me. Everything looks beautiful. A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become unnecessary.

But then again it does not tell you this:

that love will turn the entire world into something greater than itself. Even the dump, shimmering in the heat, an enormous mound of scrap metal and melting plastic and stinking things, seems strange and miraculous, like some alien world transported to earth. In the morning light, the seagulls perched on the roof of city hall look like they have been coated in thick white paint; as they light up against the pale blue sky, I think I have never seen

anything so sharp and clear and pretty in my life.

Rainstorms are incredible: falling shards of glass, the air full of diamonds. The wind whispers Marcel's name and the ocean repeats it; the swaying trees make me think of dancing.

Everything I see, and touch reminds me of him, and so everything I see, and touch is perfect.

Time jumps forward… It leaps. It pours away like water through fingers. Every time I come down to the

kitchen and see that the calendar has flipped forward yet another day, I refuse to believe it. A sick feeling grows in my stomach, a leaden sensation that gets heavier every day.

Thirty- three days until the procedure.

Thirty- two days.

Thirty days.

And in- between, snapshots, moments, mere seconds; Marcel is smearing chocolate ice cream on my nose after I've complained I'm too hot;

the heavy drone of bees circling above us in the garden, a neat line of ants marching quietly over the remains of our picnic; Marcel fingers in my hair; the curve of his elbow under my head; Ray whispering, ‘I wish you could stay with me,’ while another day bleeds out on the horizon, red and pink and gold; staring up at the sky, inventing shapes for the clouds: a turtle wearing a hat, a mole carrying a zucchini, a goldfish chasing a rabbit that is running for its life.

Snapshots, moments, mere seconds: as fragile and beautiful and hopeless as a single butterfly, flapping on against a gathering wind.

~*~

There has been a significant debate in the scientific community about whether the desire is a symptom of a system infected with amour deliria Nervosa or a precondition of the disease itself. It is unanimously agreed, however, that love, and desire to enjoy a symbiotic relationship, meaning that one cannot exist without the other.

Desire is enemy to contentment; desire is an illness, a feverish brain. Who can be considered healthy who wants?

The very word want suggests a lack, an impoverishment, and that is what desire is: an impoverishment of the brain, a flaw, a mistake. Fortunately, that can now be corrected. The streets are unbearable during the day, the sun unrelenting, and people rush the parks and beaches, desperate for shade or breeze. It gets harder to see him. East End Beach- normally unpopular- is packed most of the time,

even in the evenings after I get off work. Twice I show up to meet him, and it is too dangerous for us to talk or make a sign to each other, except for the quick nod that might pass between two strangers.

Instead, we lay out beach towels fifteen feet apart on the sand. He slips on his headphones, and I pretend to read.

Whenever our eyes meet my whole body lights up like he is lying right next to me, rubbing his hand on my back, and even though he keeps a

straight face, I can tell by his eyes that he is smiling. Nothing has ever been so painful or delicious as being so close to him and being unable to do anything about it: like eating ice cream so fast on a sweltering day you get a splitting headache.

I start to understand what Marcel said about his ‘mom’ and ‘uncle’- about how they even missed the pain after their procedures. Somehow, the pain only makes it better, more intense, more worth it. The garden is suffering from the heat.

It has not rained in more than a week, and the sunlight filtering through the trees- which in July fell softly, like the lightest footstep- now slices dagger-like through the canopy of trees, turning the grass brown. Even the bees seem drunk in the heat, circling slowly, colliding, hitting up against the withering flowers before thudding to the ground, then starting dazedly back into the air. One afternoon Marcel, and I are lying on the blanket. I am on my back; the sky above me seems to break apart into shifting patterns of blue, green, and white.

Marcel is lying on his stomach and seems nervous about something. He keeps lighting matches, watching them flare, and blowing them out only when they are at his fingertips. I think about what he told me that time in the shed: his anger about coming to Pittsburgh, the fact that he used to burn things.

There is so much about him I do not know- so much past and history buried somewhere inside of him. He has had to learn to hide it, even more than most of us. Somewhere, I think,

there is a center to him. It glows like a lump of coal being slowly crushed into diamonds, weighed down by layers and layers of the surface.

So much I have not asked him, and so much we never talk about. Yet in other ways, I feel like I do know him, and have always known him, without having to be told anything at all.

'It must be nice to be in the Wilds right now,' I blurt out, just for something to say. Ray turns to look at me, and I stammer quickly, 'I mean- it

must be cooler there. Because of all the trees and shade.'

'It is.' He props himself up on one elbow. I close my eyes and see spots of color and light dancing behind my lids. For a second Marcel does not say anything, but I can feel him watching me. 'We could go there,' he says at last… I think he must be joking, so I start to laugh. He stays quiet, though, and when I open my eyes, I see his face is composed.

'You're not serious,' I say, but already a deep well of fear has opened

inside of me and I know that he is. Somehow- I know, too, that therefore he has been acting strange all day: He misses the backwoods.

'We could go if you want to.' He looks at me for a beat longer and then rolls onto his back. 'We could go tomorrow at… After your shift…'

'But how would we-' I start to say…

He cuts me off…

'Leave that to me…' For a moment, his eyes look deeper and

darker than I have ever seen them, like tunnels. ‘Do you want to…?’

It feels wrong to talk about it, so casually, lying on the blanket, so I sit up… crossing the border is a capital offense, punishable by death, and even though I know that Marcel still does it sometimes, the enormity of the risk has not hit me until now. ‘There’s no way,’ I say, in a whisper. ‘Is it impossible…?

The fence- and the guards- plus the guns.’

‘I told you, and to leave that to me- okay?’ He sits up too, reaches out,

and cups my face quickly, smiling. ‘Anything’s possible, Liv,’ he says, one of his favorite expressions. The fear recedes… I feel so safe with him… I cannot believe that anything bad can happen to me or us… when we are together. ‘A few hours,’ he says… ‘Just to see.’

I look away… ‘I don’t know…’ My throat feels parched; the words tear at my throat as they come out. Marcel leans forward, gives me a quick kiss on the shoulder, and lies down again next to me. ‘No big deal…’ he says, throwing

one arm over his face, and eyes to shield him from the sun. ‘I just thought you might be curious, that’s all.’

‘I am curious…?’ - As to what…?

‘Liv, it’s fine- if you don’t want to go with you.

Seriously…? It was just an idea… that I had.’ I nod… even though my legs are sticky with sweat, I hug them to my chest. I feel incredibly relieved, and disappointed at the same time.

~*~

I have a sudden memory of the time Rachel dared me to do a back dive off the pier at Willard Beach and I stood trembling at its edge, too scared to jump. Eventually, she let me off the hook, bending down to whisper,

‘It’s okay, Liv. You’re not ready.’ All I would want was to get away from the edge of the pier, but as we walked back onto the beach, I felt sick and ashamed.

That is when I realize: ‘I do want to go,’ I burst out.

Marcel removes his arm… ‘For real…?’ I nod, too afraid to say the words again… to him. I am worried- if I open my mouth, I will take it back.

Part: 10

Marcel sits up slowly, I thought he would be more excited, but he does not smile. He just chews on the inside of his lip and looks away.

‘It means breaking curfew…’

‘It means breaking a lot of rules…’ He looks at me then, and his face is so full of concern- it makes

something ache deep inside of me- like lust. ‘Listen, Liv…’ He looks down and rearranges the pile of matches he has made, placing them neatly side by side. ‘Maybe it’s not such a clever idea? If we get caught that is- I mean… Like what if you or I get caught.’ He sucks in a deep breath one, that he did not know he was holding- in for so long… ‘I mean, if anything ever happened to you, I could never forgive myself.’

‘I trust you,’ I say and mean it 150 percent. He still will not look at me… why?

‘Yeah, but - the penalty for crossing over -’ He takes another deep breath. ‘The penalty for crossing over is -’ At the last second, he cannot say death.

‘Hey!’ I nudge him gently with my body, and or elbow. It is an incredible thing, how you can feel so taken care of by someone and yet feel, also, like you would die or do anything just for the chance to protect him back.

‘I know the rules. I’ve been living here longer than you have.’

He cracks a smile then. He nudges me back…

‘Hardly…. At all… wow… shit… piss… crap… fucking… dick- waa- ed…’

Part: 11

‘Born and raised. You’re a transplant.’ I nudge him again, a little harder, and he laughs and tries to catch hold of my arm. I squirm away, giggling, and he stretches out to tickle my stomach. ‘Country bumpkin…!’ I squeal, as he grabs out, and wrestles me back onto the blanket, laughing…

‘City slicker,’ he says, rolling over on top of me, and then kisses me. Everything dissolves heat, explosions of color, floating.

We agree to meet at Back and Yellow Cove the next evening, a Wednesday; since I will not be working again until Saturday, it should be easy to get Hanna's mom to allow me to sleep over at Hanna’s. Ray walks me through some of the major points of the plan. Crossing over is not impossible, but hardly anyone risks it. I guess the

whole punishable by- death thing is not a big attraction.

I do not see how we will ever make it past the electrified fence, but Ray explains that only certain portions of it are electrified. Pumping electricity through miles and miles of fence is too expensive, so relatively few stretches of the fence are ‘online’: the remainder of the fence is no more dangerous than the one that encircles the playground at Deering Oaks Park. But if everyone believes that the whole thing is juiced up with enough kilowattage to fry a

person like an egg in a pan, the fence is serving its purpose simply fine.

Part: 12

‘Smoke and mirrors, all of it,’ Marcel says, waving his hand vaguely. I assume he means Pittsburgh, the laws, all the USA. When he gets serious a little crease forms between his eyebrows, a tiny comma, and it is the cutest thing I have ever seen. I try to stay focused…

‘I still don’t see how you know all this,’ I say. ‘I mean, how did you guys figure it out…?

Did you just keep running people at the fence, to see whether they got fried in certain places…?' Ray cracks a tiny smile at me… 'Trade secrets, but I can tell you there were some observational experiments involving wild animals.' He raises his eyebrows. 'Ever eaten fried beaver?'

'Ou- ah…'

'Or fried skunk?' 'Now you're just trying to gross me out.'

There are more of us than you think:

That is another one of Marcel's favorite expressions, his constant refrain. Sympathizers everywhere, uncured and cured, positioned as regulators, police officers, government officials, scientists.

That is how we will get past the guard huts, he tells me. One of the most active sympathizers in Pittsburgh is matched with the guard who works the night shift at the northern tip of the bridge, right where we will be crossing. She and Ray have developed a sign, on nights he wants to cross over, he leaves

a certain flyer in her mailbox, the stupid photocopied kind that takeout delis; and dry cleaners give out.

This one advertises for a free eye exam with Dr. Jaheah (which seems obvious to me, but Ray says that re-sisters, and sympathizers- live with so much stress they need to be allowed their little private jokes,) besides whenever she finds it, she makes sure to put an extra-large dose of Valium in the coffee; she makes for her husband to drink during his shift.

‘Poor guy,’ Ray says, grinning… at me… ‘Nope- no matter how much coffee he drinks, he just can’t seem to stay awake.’ I can tell how much the resistance means to him, and how proud he is of the fact that it is there, healthy, thriving, shooting its arms through Pittsburgh. I try to smile, but my cheeks feel stiff, it still blows my mind that everything I have been taught- like- is so wrong, and it is still hard for me to think of the sympathizers; and resisters as allies and not enemies… Nonetheless, sneaking over the border will make me

one of them beyond any doubt. At the same time, I cannot seriously consider backing out now. I want to go; and if I am honest with myself, I became a sympathizer a long time ago, when Ray asked me whether I wanted to meet him at The Cove, and I said yes.

I have only hazy memories of the girl I was before then- the girl who always did what she was told and never lied and counted the days until her procedure with feelings of excitement, not horror and dread. The girl who was

afraid of everyone and everything. The girl who was afraid of herself.

When I get home from the store the next day, I make a big point of asking my mom if I can borrow her cell phone. Then I text Hana: ‘Sleepover tonight with- Hanna? Text message- Read’s- ‘Sleepover 2- night- W/ - H.’

Part: 13

I/we girls feel- ‘All girls do with make- up is make themselves feel more self- conscious.’ ‘Wet wipes are a girl’s best- friend, no more just rubbing it all

in, and they're good for the underarms too.’

Looking back- Music- scales: Here is how to remember this- Every good boy does fine- rhymes with the line- E G D F. Space rhymes with face- F A C E. do you see ones you hit a be in treble it goes the downward.

1 and e 2 and e 3 and 4 four do that- I want to say to music people of today.

The squiggly thingies are a rest use it and stop like a period in a sentence, God breath here- it did- it

needs to go 200 beats per- minute. What is rests? Use um! I do not read 90 words a minute either, yet I can do it right now, and not fuck up slow it down… and do this too. You do not need to audio tune so much if you know this shit here. Stop rushing time and give my chair to a first-year student, I no more than she ever will. Six years- I studied with the expert teacher- Mr. Paul Walker of IUP- I have his background in all bass, and even strings and winds.

Um- do not say anything back to this. Or I will make you look like a fool in front of your friends. The same can be said to the teacher that fakes the way through everything that I had for a class in the past. So- you learn it- I did this shit way-way on the back- ass hole- no thanks to you-you owe in companion you all do- me- oh- one of these things is not like the other- yes you do not get it do you- retard! Sue me!

You fucked with the wrong guy! On a trumpet, if the ball matches

the tip of your nose in height and angle then that is right- end of the story. You bake my life again and back your face! And you need to fix my teeth for that one also thanks for the cap. I love this one how to hold a trumpet this is for my line that was taken away for I could not handle it- you take your right hand and wrap your pinkie around the C- hold the ring. Lightly overlap the 3 fingers on top of the vails- for you that do not get it- or can handle it- the thing that goes up and down to you.

Do not mash your whole face in the mouthpiece! And F natural is not F sharp for the little one. Yet I can say that the first-year students know it all. I do not claim to know it all but- what happened to the ways it was years before? Left hand- wrap your thumb around the back of the valves, index, and pointer around the two in the front, with the middle one in the hock ring, and the pinkie resting on the 3- valve slide not under not above on top. Do you need a picture to get it? I can sign that for yah- in your blue pen!

Naturals are the ones up there with nothing next to it. So- what flat and what sharp and with now miner over major, do you know?

Karly said- ‘Understatement here for real’s: ‘The Pony Express’ school’s newspaper said- quite- ‘Jenna T is the biggest flirt, and the most likable… Just say she is mostly to succeed- and I giggle my ass off at that one too.’

This has been our code recently whenever I need her to cover for me. We have told mom we have

been spending a lot of time with Allison Dalsin, who recently graduated with us. She and her family are even richer than Hana’s family, and Allison is a stuck-up bitch. I dirty and poor- or so they say- Yet I shake it off- oh uh ah- shake it off! Hanna originally protested using her as the mysterious ‘A,’ on the basses that she did not even like to think about pretend hanging out with her, but I convinced her in the end.

Part: 14

(Remembering the past)

Mom would never call the HERE FAMILY to check up on me. She would be too intimidated, and embarrassed- my family is impure, tainted by mom 2nd husband's defection and, of course, by my mother, and Mr. Dalsin is the president and founder of the chapter of that piece, that I was talking about.

Allison could hardly stand to look at me when we were in school together, and way back in elementary school, after my mother died, she asked to switch desks to be farther away from

me, telling the teacher that I smelled like something dying.

Hanna's response comes almost immediately. 'U got it. 'C u tonight.' The text message read- saying: 'You have got it- I will see you tonight.'

I wonder what Allison would think if she knew I would have been using her as cover for my boyfriend. She would freak out for sure, and the thought makes me smile. A little before seven o'clock I come downstairs with my overnight bag slung conspicuously over my shoulder. I have even let a few

of my pajamas poke out, funny I were them out like the most girl yet there off at home, I run around naked there- I have packed the whole bag exactly as- I would have if I were going to Hanna's.

When mom gives me a flitting smile and tells me to have an enjoyable time, I feel a brief pang of guilt. I lie so often and so easily now. Then it is not enough to stop me- not at all. Once outside I head toward the North End just in case Jenny or mom is watching from the windows. The walk is long, and I make it to Deering Highlands just

as the last of the light is swirling out of the sky. As always, the streets here are deserted. I push through the rusted metal gate that surrounds the possessions, slide aside the loose slats covering one ground- floor window, and winch myself into the house. The darkness surprises me, and for a moment I stand there, blinking until my eyes adjust to the low light.

Part: 15

The air feels sticky and stale, and the house smells like mildew. Various forms begin to arise, and I

make my way into the living room, and to the mold spotted sofa. Its springs are in trouble, and half of its stuffing has been torn out, by mice, but you can tell that once it must have been pretty-elegant, even.

I fish my clock out from my bag and set the alarm for eleven-thirty. It is going to be a long night. Then I stretch out on the lumpy couch, bawling my backpack underneath my head. It is not the world's most comfortable pillow, but it will do. I close my eyes and let the sounds of the mice scrabbling, and

the low groans, and the mysterious ticking of the walls lull me to sleep.

I wake up in the darkness from a nightmare about my mother. I sit up straight, and for one panicked second do not know where I am. The faulty springs squeal underneath me and then I remembered it all in the past in my mind. I fumble for my alarm clock and see that it is already 12:21- I know I should get up, but I still feel groggy from the heat and the dream, and for a few more instants I just sit there,

taking deep breaths. I am sweating; the hair is sticking to the back of my neck.

My dream was the one I usually have but this time reversed: I was floating in the deep- sea, treading water, watching my mother perched on some crumbling ledge hundreds and hundreds of feet above me- so far- I could not make out any of her features, just the blurry lines of her silhouette, framed against the sun. I was trying to call out a warning to her, trying to lift my arms, and wave at her to go back, away from the edge, but the more I

struggled the more the water seemed to drag at me and hold me back, the consistency of glue, suctioning my arms in place and oozing in my throat to freeze the words there.

Besides, all the time and was drifting around me like snow, and I knew at any second, she would fall and smash her head on the jagged rocks, which poked up through the water like sharpened fingernails.

Then she was falling, flailing, a black spot growing bigger and bigger against the blazing sun, and I was

trying to scream, but I could not, and as the figure grew larger, I realized it was not my mother headed for the rocks. It was

Ray…

Part: 16

That is when I woke up. I finally stand, slightly dizzy, trying to ignore a feeling of dread. I go slowly, gropingly, to the window, and am relieved once I am outside, even though I am in more danger on the streets. But at least there is a bit of a breeze. The atmosphere in the house was stifling.

Ray is already waiting for me when I arrive at Back and Gold Cove, crouching in the shadows cast by a group of trees that stand near the old parking lot. He is so perfectly concealed that I trip over him.

Part: 17

He reaches up and draws me down into a crouch. In the moonlight, his eyes seem to glow, like a cat’s. He gestures silently across Back and Gold Cove, to the line of twinkling lights just before the border: the guard huts. From a distance, they look like a line of

bright white lanterns strung up for a nighttime picnic- cheerful.

Twenty- one feet or more beyond the security points is the actual fence, and beyond the fence, the backwoods. They have never looked quite so strange to me as they do now, dancing and swaying in the wind. I am glad Ray and I agreed not to express until we crossed over. The lump in my throat is making it difficult to breathe, much less say anything.

We will be crossing over at the tip of Bridge so high up in the valleys,

on the northeast point of the cove: if we were swimming, a direct diagonal from our meetup point. Ray impels my hand three times. That is our signal to move to the sounds… I follow him as we skirt the perimeter of the cove, being careful to avoid the marshland; it looks deceptively like grass, especially in the dark, but you can get sucked down almost knee-deep before you realize the difference. Ray arrows from shadow to shadow, moving noiselessly on the grass. In places- he seems to vanish completely before my eyes, to melt into the darkness.

As we loop around to the north side of the cove, the guard stations begin to outline themselves more clearly- becoming actual buildings, one-room huts made of concrete and bulletproof glass. Sweat pricks up on my palms, and the lump in my throat seems to quadruple in size until I feel like I am being strangled.

I suddenly see how stupid our plan sounds to me and them. A hundred- a thousand! Things could go wrong. The sentry guard in number twenty- two might not have had his

coffee yet- or he might have had it, nonetheless, not enough to knock him out- or the Valium might not have kicked in. As well as even if he is asleep, Ray could have been wrong about the parts of the fence that are not electrified; or the city might have pumped on the power, just for the night.

I am so scared I feel like I might faint. I want to get Ray's attention and scream that we must turn around, call the whole thing off, but he is still moving swiftly up ahead of me,

and screaming anything- or making any noise at all will bring the guards down on us for sure. The guards make the regulators look like little kids playing police officers and robbers.

Regulators and raiders have nightsticks and dogs; guards have rifles and tear gas.

Part: 18

We finally reach the northern arm of the cove. Ray drops down behind one of the larger trees and waits for me to catch up. I go into a crouch next to him.

This is my last opportunity to tell him I want to go back. But I cannot speak, and when I try to shake my head no, nothing happens.

I feel like I am back in my dream, getting slurped into the dark, floundering like an insect stuck in a bowl of honey.

Ray can tell how frightened I am.

He leans forward and fumbles for a moment, trying to find my ear. His mouth bumps once on my neck and grazes my cheek lightly- which despite

my panic makes me shiver with pleasure- and then skims my earlobe.

‘It’s going to be okay,’ he undertones to me, and I feel slightly better.

Nothing bad will happen when- I am with Ray.

Then we are up again.

We run off moving forward at intervals, sprinting silently from one tree to the next and then stopping while Ray listens- as well as makes sure

there has been no change, no shouts or sounds of approaching footsteps.

Stum- p- Stum- p- Stum- p!

The sound is getting closer to me.

Part: 19

The moments of exposure- of dashing from cover to cover- grow longer as the trees begin to thin out, and the whole time we are getting closer and closer to the line where the fringe of grass and growth disappears

altogether and we will have to move out in the open, completely vulnerable.

It is only about fifty feet from the last bush to the fence, but it might as well be a lake of burning fire.

Beyond the torn-up remains of a road, that existed before Pittsburgh was enclosed is the fence itself: looming, silver, in the moonlight, like some enormous spider webs. A place where things stick, get caught, are eaten. Ray has told me to take my time, to focus; when I pick my way over the barbed wire at the top, but I cannot

help but picture myself impaled on all those sharp, spiny barbs. And then, suddenly, we are out- past the incomplete protection obtainable by the trees, moving quickly over the loose gravel and shale of the old road. He and I move ahead of me, bent double, and I stoop as low as I can, but it does not make me feel any less exposed.

Fear it screams…

Hold Me

Ray

Part: 1

Kellie- Yes it screams slams into me from all sides at once; I have never- ever known anything like this fear. I am not sure whether the wind picks up at that second or whether it is just the terror cutting through me, but my whole body feels like ice hangs from the trees in her story.

Ray- The darkness comes alive on all sides of us, full of darting shadows and malicious, looming shapes, ready to turn into a guard any

second, and I picture the silence suddenly punctuated by screams, sighs, horns, bullets. I picture blooming pain and bright lights.

The world seems to transform into a series of disconnected images: a bright white circle of light surrounding guard hut twenty- two, which expands ever outward, as though hungry, and ready to swallow us; inside, a guard slumped backward in his chair, mouth open, sleeping…

Kellie- Ray turning to me, smiling- is it possible he is smiling?

Stones dancing underneath my feet like at prom night in his arms. Everything feels far away, as unreal and flimsy as a shadow cast by a flame. Even I do not feel real, I cannot feel myself breathing or moving, though I must be doing both.

As well as then just like that, we are at the fence. Ray springs jump into the air, and for a second, he pauses there. I want to scream Stop! Stop! And halt!

Part: 2

Ray- I picture the crack and sizzle as her body connects with fifty thousand volts of electricity, but then she lands on the fence, and the fence sways silently: dead and cold, just like he said.

Kellie- I should be climbing up after him, but I cannot. Not immediately. A feeling of wonder creeps over me, slowly pushing out the fear. I have been so terrified of this and things like this… of the border fence since- I was a baby.

I have never gotten within five feet of the fence now. Do you see it…? We have been warned not to, had it drilled into us. They told us we would fry; told us it would make our hearts go haywire, kill us instantly. Now I reach out and place my hand through the chain- link, run my fingers over it. Dead and cold and harmless I am like her or so I see Jenny, as I angel looking at me saying to do this all she is dark and looking at me with evil eyes, the same kind of fence the city uses for playgrounds and schoolyards. In that second it hits me how deep and

complex the lies are, how they run through Pittsburgh like sewers, backing up into everything, filling the city with stench: the whole city built and constructed within a perimeter of lies. Ray is a fast climber; he has made it halfway up the fence.

He looks over his shoulder and sees that I am still standing there like an idiot, not moving. He jerks his head at me like, what are you doing?

I put my hand out to the fence again and then immediately jerk it back again: A shock runs through me all at

once, but it has nothing to do with the voltage that should be pumping there. Something has just occurred to me.

They have lied about everything- about the fence, and the existence of the- Invalids, about a million other things besides. They told us the raids were carried out for our protection.

They told us the watchdogs were only interested in keeping the peace. They told us that love was a disease. They told us it would kill us in

the end. For the very first time, I realize that this, too, might be a lie.

There were mess and stink and blood and the smell of skin burning. There were people: people standing and eating, talking on the phone, frying eggs, or singing in the shower.

I am overwhelmed with sadness for everything that was lost and filled with anger toward the people who took it away. My people- or at least, my old people.

‘What?’ I ask. The intensity of his gaze nearly knocks the breath out of

me - as though he is staring straight at me.

He does not answer me directly. He flips forward a few pages in the book, but he does not glance down at it. He keeps his eyes on me the whole time.

‘You want to hear a different one?’ He does not wait for me to answer before beginning to recite, ‘‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.’’

There is that word again: love. My heart stops when he says it, then stutters into a frantic rhythm.

‘‘I love thee to the depth, breadth, and height my soul can reach.’’ I know he is only speaking someone else’s words, but they seem to come from him anyway. His eyes are dancing with light; in each of them, I see a bright point of candlelight reflected.

He takes a step forward and kisses my forehead softly. ‘‘I love thee to the level of every day’s most quiet

need.'' It feels as though the floor is swinging - like I am falling.

'Alex-' I start to say, but the word gets tangled in my throat. He kisses each cheekbone- a delicious, skimming kiss, barely grazing my skin. ''I love thee freely.'' 'Ray,' I say, a little louder. My heart is beating so fast I am afraid it will burst from my ribs. He pulls back and gives me a small, crooked smile.

Browning,' he says, then traces a finger over the bridge of my nose. 'You don't like it-'

The way he says it, so low and serious, still staring into my eyes, makes me feel as though he is asking something else.

'No. I mean, yes. I mean, I do, but -' The truth is, I'm not sure what I mean. I cannot think or speak clearly. A single word is swirling around inside me- a storm, a hurricane- and I must squeeze my lips together to keep it from swelling up to my tongue and fighting its way out into the open. Love, love, love, love. A word I have never

pronounced, not to anyone, a word I have never even really let myself think.

‘You don’t have to explain.’ He takes another step backward. Again- I have the sense, confusedly, that we are talking about something else.

I have disappointed him somehow.

Whatever has just passed between us- and something did, even if I am not sure what or how or why- has made him sad.

I can see it in his eyes, even though he is still smiling, and it makes me want to apologize, or throw my arms around him and ask him to kiss me. But I am still afraid to open my mouth- afraid that the word will come shooting out, and terrified about what comes afterward. ‘Come here.’ Ray sets the book down and offers me his hand. ‘I want to show you something.’

He leads me over to the bed, and again a wave of shyness overtakes me. I am not sure what he expects, and

when he sits down, I hang back, feeling self- conscious.

‘It’s okay, Hanna,’ he says. As always, hearing him say my name relaxes me. He scoots backward on the bed and lies down on his back, and I do the same, so we are lying side by side. The bed is narrow. There’s just enough room for the two of us.

‘See?’ He says, tilting his chin upward.

Above our heads, the star’s flare, glitter, and flash: thousands and thousands of them, so many thousands

they look like snowflakes whirling away into the inky dark. I cannot help it; I gasp.

Part: 3

I do not think I have ever seen so many stars in my life. The sky looks so closely- strung so taut above our heads, beyond the roofless trailer- it feels as though we are falling into it, as though we could jump off the bed and the sky would catch us, hold us, bounce us like a trampoline.

‘What do you think?’ He asks.

‘I love it.’ The word pops out, and instantly the weight on my chest dissipates. ‘I love it,’ I say again, testing it. An easy word to say, once you say it. Short. To the point. Rolls off the tongue. Amazingly, I have never said it before.

I can tell Ray is pleased. The smile in his voice grows bigger. ‘The no plumbing thing is kind of a bummer,’ he says. ‘But you have to admit the view is killer.’

‘I wish we could stay here,’ I blurt out, and then quickly stutter, ‘I mean, not really.

Not for good, but - you know what I mean.’

He moves his arm under my neck, so I inch over and lay my head in the spot where his shoulder meets his chest, where it fits perfectly. ‘I’m glad you got to see it,’ he says. For a while, we just lie there in silence. His chest rises and falls with his breathing, and after a while, the motion starts to lull me to sleep.

My limbs feel impossibly heavy, and the stars seem to be rearranging themselves into words. I want to keep looking, to read out their meaning, but my lids are heavy too: impossible, impossible to keep my eyes open.

‘Ray?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Tell me that poem again.’ My voice does not sound like my own; my words seem to come from a distance.

‘Which one?’ He whispers.

‘The one you know by heart.’

Drifting: I am drifting.

‘I know a lot of them by heart.’

‘Anyone, then.’ He takes a deep breath and begins: ‘‘I carry your heart with me. I carry it in my heart. I am never without it.’’ He speaks on, words washing over me, the way that sunlight skips over the surface of water and filters into the depths below, lighting up the darkness. I keep my eyes closed. Amazingly, I can still see the stars: whole galaxies blooming from nothing-

pink and purple suns, vast silver oceans, a thousand white moons.

It seems like I have only been asleep five minutes when he is gently shaking me awake. The sky is still inky black, the moon high and bright, but I can tell the candles are pooling around us that I must have been out for at least an hour or so.

‘Time to go,’ he says, brushing the hair off my forehead.

‘What time is it?’ My voice is thick with sleep.

‘A little before three.’ Alex sits up and scoots off the bed, then reaches out a hand and pulls me to my feet. ‘We’ve got to cross before Sleeping Beauty wakes up.’ ‘Sleeping Beauty?’ I shake my head confusedly.

Part: 4

Ray laughs softly. ‘After poetry,’ he says, leaning down to kiss me, ‘we move on to fairy tales.’

Then it is back through the woods; down the broken path that leads past the bombed-out houses; through the woods again. The whole time I feel

as though I have not woken up. I am not even scared or nervous when we climb the fence. Getting over the barbed wire is infinitely easier the second time around, and as though the shadows as though the shadows have texture and shield us like a cloak. The guard at hut number twenty- one is still in the same position- head tilted back, feet on his desk, mouth open- and soon we are weaving our way around the cove.

Then we are slipping silently through the streets toward Highlands,

and it is then I have the strangest thought, half dread, and half wish: that all of this is a dream, and when I wake up, I will find myself in the Boondocks. I will wake up and find I have always been there, and that all of Pittsburgh- and the workshops, and the curfew, and the procedure- was some long, twisted nightmare. I only spent a few hours there and I miss the Wastelands already- the wind through the trees that sound just like the ocean, the incredible smells of blooming plants, the invisible scurrying things- all that

life, pushing and extending in every direction, on and on and on.

No walls-

Part: 5

Then Ray is leading me to the sofa and shaking out a blanket over me, kissing me, and wishing me a good night. He has the morning shift at the labs and has just barely enough time to go home, shower, and make it work on time. I hear his footsteps melting away into the darkness.

Then I sleep. Love: a single word, a wispy thing, a word no bigger or longer than an edge.

That is what it is: an edge; a razor. It draws up through the center of your life, cutting everything in two. Before and after.

The rest of the world falls away on either side. Before and after- and during, a moment no bigger or longer than an edge.

‘Live free or die,’ I say- as she did. One of the strangest things about life is that it will chug on, blind and

oblivious, even as your private world- you are little carved- out sphere- is twisting and morphing, even breaking apart. One day you have parents: the next day you are an orphan. One day you have a place and a path. The next day you are lost in a wilderness.

And still, the sun rises, and clouds mass and drift, and people shop for groceries and toilets flush, and blinds go up and down. That is when you realize that most of its- life, the relentless mechanism of existing- is not about you. It does not include you at

all. It will thrust onward even after you have jumped the edge.

Even after you are dead.

When I make my way back into downtown Pittsburgh in the morning, that is what surprises me the most- how normal everything looks. I do not know what I was expecting.

I did not think that buildings would have tumbled down overnight, that the streets would have melted into rubble, but it is still a shock to see a stream of people carrying briefcases, and shop owners unlocking their front

doors, and a single car trying to push through a crowded street. It seems absurd that they do not know, have not felt any change or tremor, even as my life has been completely turned upside down. As I head home, I keep feeling paranoid, like someone will be able to smell the Wilds on me, will be able to tell just from seeing my face that I have crossed over.

The back of my neck itches as though it is being poked with branches, and I keep whipping off my backpack to make sure there are not any leaves or

burrs clinging to it- not that it matters since it is not like Pittsburgh is treeless.

Nonetheless, no one even glances in my direction. It is a little before nine o’clock, and most people are rushing to get to work on time. An endless blur of normal people doing normal things, eyes straight ahead of them, paying no attention to the short, nondescript girl with a lumpy backpack pushing past them.

The short, nondescript girl with a secret burning inside of her like a fire.

It is as though my night in the Wilds has sharpened my vision around the edges. Even though everything looks superficially the same, it seems somehow different- flimsy, as though you could put your hand through the buildings and sky and even the people. I remember being incredibly young and watching Rachel build a sandcastle at the beach. She must have worked on it for hours, using different cups and

containers to shape towers and turrets. When it was done it looked perfect, like it could have been made from stone.

But when the tide came in, it did not take more than two or three waves to dissolve its shape entirely. I remember I burst into tears, and my mother bought me an ice cream cone and made me share it with Rachel.

That is what Pittsburgh looks like this morning: like something in danger of dissolving. I keep thinking about what Ray always says: There are more of us than you think.

I sneak a glance at everyone who goes by, thinking I will be able to read some secret sign on their faces, some mark of resistance, but everyone looks the same as always: harried, hurried, annoyed, zoned out. When I get home, mom in the kitchen washing dishes. I try to scoot past her, but she calls out to me. I pause with one foot on the stairs. She comes into the hallway, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

'How was Hanna's?' she asks. She flicks her eyes all over my face, searchingly, as though checking for

signs of something. I try to will back another bout of paranoia. She could not know where I have been.

‘It was fine,’ I say, shrugging, trying to sound casual. ‘Didn’t get a lot of sleep, though.’

‘Mmm.’ Carol keeps looking at me intensely. ‘What did you girls do together?’

She never asks about Hana’s house and has not for years. Something is wrong, I think.

‘You know, the usual. Watched some TV. Hana gets, like, seven channels.’ I cannot tell if my voice sounds weird and high- pitched, or if I am just imagining it.

Carol looks away, twisting her mouth up like she has accidentally gotten a mouthful of sour milk. I can tell she is trying to work out a way to say something unpleasant; she gets her sour milk face whenever she must give out sad news. She knows about Ray, she knows, she knows. The walls press closer, and the heat is stifling.

Then, to my surprise, she curls her mouth into a smile, reaches out, and places a hand on my arm. ‘You know, Lena - it won’t be like this for very much longer.’ I have avoided thinking about the procedure for twenty- four hours, but now that awful, looming number pops back into my head, throwing a shadow over everything.

Seventeen days.

‘I know,’ I squeeze out. Now my voice sounds weird. Carol nods and keeps the strange half-smile plastered

on her face. ‘I know it’s hard to believe, but you won’t miss her once it’s over.’

‘I know.’ Like there is a dying frog caught in my throat.

Carol keeps nodding at me vigorously. It looks as though her head is connected to a yo-yo. I get the feeling she wants to say something more, something that will reassure me, but she obviously cannot think of anything because we just stand there, frozen like that, for a minute.

Part: 6

Finally- I say, ‘I’m going upstairs. Shower.’ It takes all my willpower just to get out the words. Seventeen days keep tearing through my mind, like an alarm.

Mom seems relieved that I have broken the silence. ‘Okay,’ she says. ‘Okay…’ I start up the stairs two at a time. I cannot wait to lock myself in the bathroom. Even though it must be more than eighty degrees in the house, I want to stand under a stream of beating hot water, melt myself into vapor.

‘Oh, Liv.’ Mom calls out to me as an afterthought. I turn around and she is not looking at me. She is inspecting the fraying border of one of her dish towels. ‘You should put on something nice. A dress- or those white slacks you got last year. And do your hair. Don’t just leave it to air- dry.’

‘Why?’ I do not like the way she will not look at me, especially since her mouth is going all screwy again. Hanna snaps her head up and looks at me. ‘Not alone,’ she says quickly. ‘Of course, not alone. Her mother will be

coming with us. And I will be here too. Besides, she had her procedure last month.' As though that is what is bothering me.

Today?' I must reach out and place one hand on the wall. Somehow, I have managed to completely forget about her some that neat, printed name on a page.

Hanna must think I am nervous about meeting him because she smiles at me.

'Don't worry, Liv. You will be fine. We will do most of the talking. I

just thought you two should meet, since -’ She doesn’t finish her sentence. She does not have to.

Since we are paired. Since we will be married.

Part: 7

Bedtime oh bedtime-

Since I will share my bed with him and wake up every day of my life next to him and must let him put his hands on me and must sit across from him at dinner eating canned asparagus and listening to him rattle on about

plumbing or carpentry or whatever it is he is going to get assigned to do.

‘No!’ I burst out.

Kellie- I look startled or so you would say. She is not used to hearing that word, certainly not from me.

‘What do you mean, no?’

I lick my lips. I know refusing her is dangerous, and I know that it is wrong.

But I cannot meet her soon enough. I will not. I will not sit there and pretend to like him or listen to

mom talk about where we will live in a few years, while Ray is out there somewhere- waiting for me to meet up with him or tapping his fingers against his desk while he listens to music, or breathing, or doing anything at all. ‘I mean -’ I struggle for an excuse.

‘I mean- I mean, couldn’t we do it some other time? I don’t feel good.’ This, at least, is true.

‘Oh,’ I say. The way I figure it, life's the total of all our small mistakes, little tragedies, bad choices. Parents teach you a lot of things, but the most

important thing they teach you is this: how people will fuck you up in the future. If they are any good, they teach you to get used to it.

Like the party's before- I have not been upstairs since the first time Ray brought me here with Hanna when we made it a point to explore every room of the house. I did not even think to check the second floor earlier this afternoon. Here it is even darker than downstairs, if possible, and hotter too, a black and drifting mist.

He starts shuffling down the hall, past a row of identical wooden doors.

‘This way…’ Above us, a frantic sound of fluttering: bards, disturbed by the sound of his voice. He stops at the door to the master bedroom. I shiver. But Ray is emphatic, so I let him open the door and I pass inside in front of him. As soon as we walk into the room I gasp and stop so suddenly he bumps into me. The room is incredible; it has transformed me into a romantic

thought. I was his wife now… a happy ever after no yet that's- a life, no?

'Well?' There is a note of anxiety in-

His voice… 'What do you think of this?' I cannot answer him immediately.

He has shoved the old bed when he jumped in a naked, into one of the corners, and swept me off my feet, the floor perfectly clean. The windows- or what windows remain are flung open, so the air smells like gardenias and night-blooming jasmine, their

scents drifting in on the wind from outside. He has arranged our blanket and books in the center of the room and unraveled a sleeping bag there too, surrounding the whole area with dozens and dozens of candles stuck in funny makeshift canisters, like old cups and mugs or discarded Coca-Cola cans, just like they were at his house in the woods. He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

'Ray-' I start to say, Suddenly I am almost frightened of him, terrified of his absolute and utter perfection. He

leans forward and kisses me. And when he is pressed so close to me, with the softness of his T-shirt brushing my face and the smell of suntan lotion and grass coming off his skin, he feels less frightening.

'It's too dangerous to go back to the Wilds.' His voice is hoarse, as though he has been yelling for an exceptionally long time, and a muscle is working furiously in his jaw. 'So, I brought the Wilds here. I thought you would like it.'

‘I do. I- I love it.’ I press my hands against my chest, wishing I could somehow be even closer to him. I hate skin; I hate bones and bodies. I want to curl up inside of him and be carried there forever. His face so quickly I can barely catch them all, and his jaw keeps twitching back and forth. ‘I know we don’t have much time like you said. We hardly have any time at all-’

‘No!’ I bury my face in his chest, wrap my arms around him and squeeze.

Unimaginable, incomprehensible: a life lived without him. The idea breaks me- the fact that he is almost crying breaks me- the fact that he did this for me, the fact that he believes I am worth it- kills me. He is my world and my world- is him, and without him, there is no world.

‘I won’t do it. I will not go through with it. I cannot. I want to be with you. I need to be with you.’

He grasps my face, bends down to look into my eyes. His face is blazing now, full of hope.

‘You don’t have to go through with it…’ he says.

His words come tumbling out.

He has been thinking about this for a long time and only trying not to say it. ‘Liv, you don’t have to do anything. We could run away together. To the backwoods. Just go and never come back. Only- Liv, we could not ever come back.

You know that, right? They would kill us both or lock us up forever- a lifetime of running: that is what I

have just said I wanted. I take a quick step backward, feeling suddenly dizzy.

'Wait,' I say. 'Just hold on a second.'

He releases me. The hope dies in his face all at once, and for a moment we just stand there, looking at each other.

'You weren't serious,' he says finally.

'You didn't mean it.'

'No, I did mean it, it's just-'

‘It’s just that you’re scared,’ he says.

He walks to the window and stares out at the night, refusing to look at me.

His back is terrifying again: so solid and impenetrable, a wall.

‘I’m not scared. I’m just-’ I fight a murky feeling. I do not know what I am. I want Ray and I want my old life and I want peace and happiness and I know that I cannot live without him, all at the same time.

‘It’s okay…’ His voice is dull. ‘You don’t have to explain.’

‘My mother,’ I burst out. He turns then, looking startled. I am as surprised as he is. I did not even know I was going to say the words until I said them. ‘I don’t want to be like her. Don’t you understand? It is me or her take your pick and he said the words…

I will…

Chapter: 141

Retrograde…

‘He is,’ he says, and makes an abrupt right turn down a short hallway that ends at a heavy iron door. This is marked with another printed sign. It says, LIFERS. Underneath the word, someone has written in pen, HA-HA.

‘What are you-’ I am more confused than ever, but I do not have time to finish formulating my question. Alex pushes his way out the door and the smell that greets us- of wind and grass and fresh things- is so unexpected and welcome that I stop speaking, taking long, grateful gulps of

air. Without realizing it, I have been breathing through my mouth. Do you feel like you are falling? You have taken this step-in front of you is further from the truth. You fall apart in front of me again, again! Yes- denial is not the way to forgiveness.

We are in a tiny courtyard, surrounded by the stained gray sides of the Vaults. The grass here is amazingly lush, reaching to my knees. A single tree twists upward to our left, and a bird is twittering in its branches. It is surprisingly nice out here, peaceful,

and pretty- strange to be standing in the middle of a little garden while enclosed by the massive stone walls of the prison, like being at the exact center of a hurricane, and finding peace and silence in the middle of so much shrieking damage.

He has moved several paces away. He is standing, head bowed, with his eyes on the ground. He must have a sense too of the peacefulness here, the stillness that seems to hang in the air like a veil, covering everything in softness and rest. The sky above us is

darker than it was when we first entered the vaults: Against all the grayness and shadow, the grass stands vivid and electric, as though it is lit up from inside. It will rain at any second. It must. I have the sensation of the world holding its breath before a giant exhale, balancing, teetering, about to let go.

'Here.' His voice rings out, surprisingly loud, and it startles me.

'Right here.' He points to a shard of rock sticking up crookedly from the ground. 'That's where my

father is.’ The grass is broken up by dozens of these rocks, which appeared to be naturally, haphazardly arranged. Then I realize that they have been deliberately tamped down into the earth. Some of them are covered in fading black markings, mostly illegible, although on one stone I recognize the word BLAIR and on another DIED.

Tombstones, I realize, as the purpose of the courtyard dawns on me. We are standing in the middle of a graveyard. Alex is staring down at a large chunk of concrete, as flat as a

tablet, pressed down into the earth in front of his feet. All the writing is visible here, the words neatly printed in what looks like a black marker, their edges slightly blurred as though someone has been continuously retracing them over an extended period. I look at her grave- I want to reach out and slip my hand into Ray's, but I do not think we are safe.

A few windows are surrounding the courtyard on the ground floor, and even though they are thickly coated in grime, someone could walk by at any

moment, lookout, and see us. ‘Your friends, and sister?’

He nods, then shakes his shoulders, a sudden movement as though trying to jerk himself away from sleep. ‘Yeah.’

‘He was here?’

One side of his mouth quirks up into a smile, but the rest of his face remains stony. ‘For four years I have looked over these.’ He draws a slow circle in the dirt with his toe, the first physical sign of discomfort or distraction he has given since we

arrived. At that moment I am in awe of him: Since I have known him, he has done nothing but support me and give me comfort and listen to me, and all this time he has been carrying the weight of his secrets too.

Part: 8

I say to you now dad- ‘What happened?’

I ask quietly. ‘I mean, what did he…?’ I trail off. I do not want to push the issue. It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, what a child will believe You never

loved me, It's funny that way, you can get used, To the tears and the pain, What a child will believe, You never loved me, You can't hurt me now, I got away from you, I never thought I would, you can't make me cry, you once had the power, I never felt so good about myself, seems like yesterday, I lay down next to your boots and I prayed for your anger to end, Oh Father I have sinned; Oh Father you never wanted to live that way you never wanted to hurt me, why am I running away, maybe someday, when I look back I'll be able

to say you didn't mean to be cruel
Somebody hurt you too.

~*~

Ray glances at me quickly and looks away. ‘What did he do?’ he says. The hardness has returned to his voice. ‘I don’t know. What all the people who end up see us here in this town. He thought for himself. He avoids my eyes carefully. ‘The dead ward,’ he says quietly. ‘For political prisoners, mostly. They are kept in solitary confinement. And no one ever gets released.’ He gestures around him, to the other

shards of stone poking up through the grass, dozens of makeshift graves. I would give anything to touch him, but the best I can do is an inch closer to him so that our skin is separated by only a few inches.

He looks at me then, shooting me a sad smile. showing off those awful teeth, but his eyes maintain their strange flatness, as though there is a curtain drawn over them. I wonder if this, for him, was a side effect of the cure, or whether he was always like that.

He tilts his head back, peering at Ray through narrowed eyes, grows even stronger. I remember those nights…

Kelly- Why?

Why- she and they ended it the way I did- so- that way everyone, even he would be able to see me, with their own eyes. So, they can see the wounds that they did to me. Realizing all the gashes, which they gave me over time, and the ones I give myself because of them. They all can look at me, and see it all… Just like, I see it every day when

I look at my own reflection! They all can think- about what they have done to me. However, I do not think they would care. If they did see me hanging there bare, lifeless, and limp.

They have no emotions for me in their pee- brained minds, to feel anything. I ask- can you grasp me; can you feel me? Can you get the impression of me hanging there- all by myself? I am so lonesome and afraid! You know- I do feel as if I would be better off being dead! Don't you think so too? How did I let things get so out

of hand? Or did I? Is this all meant to be?

Really…?

I just do not know what to believe anymore. I sang throw the air and jumped. I did it! But not like I planned. One way or another that made me come to my senses. I got lose from the noose, on my tree swing, and fell hard to the ground below. That is when I walked into the home, with my head down. And went up the steps up to my room dripping wet. The books are all I have now with the stone that says their

name, along with their faces looking back at me when I not looking to see them there.

Just like her, I answer myself- ‘I know that there is not one person on this planet, who genuinely cares if I am even here or not.’ Oh God- ‘Why does my life have to be like this?’ I do not think I can take any more of living in this town!

The PEOPLE, SCHOOL, EVERYONE, and EVERYTHING is so fucking FAKE! It is all just another way for SOCIETY to make me feel inferior.

Because they think, they are so SUPERIOR to me, and who I am to them. Every day of my life, I have felt like I have been drowning in a pool, with weights attached to my ankles.

I say, Maggie- Of course, there is no way for me to escaping from the chains that are holding her him, and me down. The one and only person, that holds the key to my freedom: WILL NEVER LET ME GO! I live in this small dull town for too damn long. It is an UNSYMPATHETIC, obscure, lonely, depressed, and depressing place. All

these streets surrounding me are covered with filth.

I respect myself more than that, but it is getting harder to regardless. If that is what it takes to be popular, I do not want it. These types of guys just are not worthy of me I suppose. The other girls can have them all they want, and you know they do. Then lastly, nerds a sad and pathetic grope of creatures that are so misunderstood.

Really through no fault of their own. Most of the time, it is just the way

they all are, and not what they choose to be. Just like most of us out there. You know I am not even on that list either. As for me- and my category, I would have to say that I am in the ‘Rejected classification.’ or ‘Reject!’ However- I do not want anybody's pity. I just want their RESPECT! That is just something I cannot have been in this unwanted grouping. Being in this rejected category is not always pleasant as you can see. I have learned to adapt and overcome life's many difficulties up to now at least.

I have learned that some people can do harmful and heinous things to others, yet they prosper. Then someone like me must SUFFER through it all. It eats at you over time: ‘People are fake anger and frustration will eat at you like cancer.’ Until it kills you! When I look back at everything in my past, the whole photograph comes into focus. ‘Revenge is not the answer, everyone gets a turn.’ It is just a matter of time, what coming around for you, will you be like my friends and family, or like me or her or him?

What do you choose to be?

~Nevaeh~